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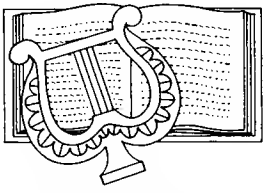

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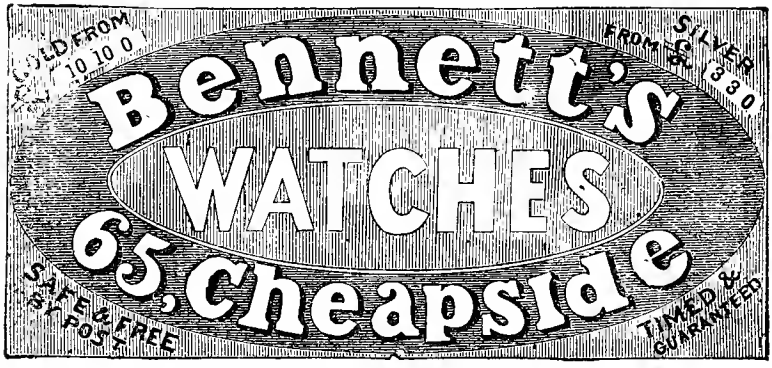

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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1884

"We twain have met like ships upon the sea"

LIKE SHIPS UPON THE SEA.

CHAPTER I.

Two women were sitting in a shabbily furnished lodging in Rome one November evening. A small wood fire smouldered in an open fireplace, and a petroleum lamp, with a paper shade, representing Venice by copper-coloured moonlight, burned on the table. The furniture was of faded crimson, the carpet a thread-bare drugget, the walls were covered with an orange and red flock paper. The outer shutter had not been shut, so that the dusky forms of tall houses opposite loomed still visible against the sky. The sky was the only beautiful thing in sight, and that was very beautiful. The brief twilight of a southern climate had yet a few minutes to live; and hues of perfect purity, rosy, and pale gold, and green, lingered on the horizon. One of the occupants of the room had opened the window, with intent to close the *persiane*, or lath shutters, but instead of doing so she was leaning out. The sights and sounds and smells of the Italian street below struck freshly on her senses as being strange and foreign, although she had already lived two months in Rome. It was a narrow street in a central part of the city. Tall, grimy-looking houses flanked it, and at one end of it there was a shapeless little piazza with a small church in it. The other end led into a busy thoroughfare. It had rained during the

day, and the streets were foul with the greasy mud of a large town. An autumnal smell of damp earth and rotting leaves came up from a small convent garden adjoining the church. On the ground floor of the house from whose open window these things were being observed there was a carpenter's shop, redolent of new deal and the peculiar pungent odour of cypress wood. This was crossed now and then by a whiff of incense from the church in the neighbouring piazza, as the leathern curtain of the door swung open to let some one pass in or out. A vendor of fresh lemons had placed his basket on the pavement near the archway leading to the house, and the fruit gave forth its aromatic fragrance to the nostrils of the just and the unjust. The smell of coarse tobacco mingled with all the other smells, and made its flavour subtly felt through them all. A string of scarlet-robed German seminarists hurried along on their way from some evening service, making "a thin red line," like the soldiers of another army, in the dusk of the street. A woman at an opposite window was holding a lively conversation with the postman—she in a fourth story, he on the pavement—and both were bawling louder than pilots in a storm; while, three streets off, a still more stentorian voice, somewhat softened by distance, cried "olives," in a long-drawn melancholy roar, like a sick lion.

"Come in, Violet, and shut the window," said a voice from within; "and pray, shut the shutters, dear! I cannot bear to have the room lighted up and the shutters left open. My mamma used to say that the cats were looking in at such times. I don't know the origin of it, but I always remember the saying. And you *do* feel as if somebody was watching you from the outside. Not the cats, of course—but somebody."

Violet, by this time, had closed the shutters and the window, and had taken from a cupboard some cups and saucers and a tiny glass flask of cream, with a vine leaf for a stopper, had set them all out on a tray, and was

busy lighting a spirit lamp under a tiny camp kettle. She was about twenty years old. She was very fair, with a smooth satin skin, blue eyes, and brown hair, with warm reddish lights in it. The outlines of the face were soft, but had no special beauty; the mouth, however, was distinctly beautiful. The lips were finely and firmly moulded as those of a Greek statue. They were beautiful in repose, and, which is rarer, they were beautiful also in movement. When they parted in a smile, they showed two rows of square white teeth, and a charming dimple came in one cheek. It was a mouth to fall in love with. The whole face was fresh and candid, an innocent, sincere face, habitually unconscious of itself. Her figure was elastic and well proportioned; a deep chest, a round, well poised throat, hands and feet not small, but well shaped. Altogether, she was an English type of healthy young womanhood. She was dressed in a dark gown, which would have become her well enough had it been made simply; but the style of its construction displayed a rash and ignorant ambition. The attempt to achieve picturesqueness by means of puffed sleeves rising up in a hunch on each shoulder was not a happy one. Still less happy was the effect of a border of worsted flowers embroidered round the collar and wrists, and down the front of the brown stuff gown. There was something jarring in the application of so much decorative labour to such ungrateful materials—as though an artificer should elaborately inlay a deal table with bits of bright tin. But the girl—her name was Violet Moore—had copied her dress, as she copied the greater part of her life's doings, from the world around her, without exercising much conscious choice in the matter. We none of us choose what accent we shall speak with. Very few of us choose what clothes we shall wear.

"How different it is all from Dozebury!" said she, thinking of the street she had been looking at.

"Different indeed!" assented the other woman, a gray-haired spinster of fifty-five, with an anxious frown

on her high narrow forehead, and a feeble projecting mouth. "Different indeed!" and then she gave a long sigh and shook her head.

"Well, I'm sure it's far superior, Aunt Betsy," said Violet, quickly.

"I don't see the superiority."

"What, Rome and Dozebury! Why, you can't compare them at all!"

"I find Rome a disappointing place, Violet. There is not a properly butchered joint of meat in the whole town. And then their superstitions!—Ah, my dear, people don't value their own country till they're out of it."

Violet took her tea-cup between her hands, and sat down on a low chair in a shady corner by the fire.

"No; we never learn to value our own country till we're out of it," repeated Miss Baines, in a musing tone.

"Well," said Violet, after a pause, "what do you say to that letter?"

"My dear, I scarcely know what to say!" (This was Miss Baines's usual formula when asked for a decisive opinion.) "Suppose you read it aloud to me. I take a thing in better when I hear it."

Violet took a folded letter from the table, where it had been lying, with Miss Baines's knitting basket on the top of it to keep it flat. It was very voluminous, consisting of four sheets which were closely written and crossed, in a long-tailed handwriting difficult to decipher. But Violet, being already familiar with its contents, was able to read aloud pretty fluently thus:—

"'*Florence*,
"'*Pension Stubbs*.

"'My Dear Miss Baines,

"'Your letter was most welcome, as I had not heard from you for an age. But I heard *about* you from more than one mutual acquaintance, and particularly from a very nice and highly respectable gentleman now staying in this house, whose father was in the

licensed victualling at Brighton for many years—*he* says a person of independent property, but that can only refer to the time when he retired from business. He is slightly lame, and is travelling for his health by the name of Parkinson, and——'

"Well, I needn't read all that," said Violet, breaking off. Miss Baines looked a little disappointed; but Violet, having impatiently skipped a page or two, proceeded:—

"'I can assure you that my informant knows all the leading people in Rome, where he boarded for several months, and met with a great deal of society, and he says you ought on no account to visit *the Signora in question*. Her husband was mixed up with a conspiracy in '48, or '59, or '66, but the date is not momentous. As to the Signora, who I have reason to know on the best authority is a *Pole* by birth——'

"Well, but there's no harm in being a Pole," exclaimed Violet, looking up, with some indignation expressed on her usually serene forehead.

"I don't see how there can be," said her aunt.

"Then why does Mrs. Lucas score it under twice, as if it was a crime?"

Miss Baines shook her head doubtfully.

Violet read on:—

"'As to the Signora, there is a great deal of equivocation about her position. It is rumoured that her first husband is still alive, although in the mines of Siberia for some political offence of an explosive nature with chemicals; and I should advise you most stringently to beware of becoming involved in visiting her receptions, nor equally to blend your name with her husband's—the present gentleman's—political researches, with which any coherency were far from advantageous, and might lead to unpleasantness on the part of the police, as I am told it did so here at Florence in the case of two young ladies, Englishwomen, who chalked the walls in the time of the Grand Duke.'

"What nonsense!" cried Violet, giving the paper an impatient tap with the back of her hand.

"I hope Mrs. Lucas may be mistaken, Violet," returned her aunt, with a little air of mild protest; "but she really uses very choice language."

"But I suppose she does not suspect you and me of wanting to get up a rebellion? Then why does she write all that rigmarole? And there are scarcely any stops." Then she bent her head once more over the letter, and went on reading:—

"'Pray be careful, my dearest Miss Baines, for your niece's sake. Remember that despite foreigners may not look on things the same as us, particularly with regard to *propriety*, yet the Signora G. is *not* visited by the female aristocracy of Rome, although I am told she has a coronet worked in the corner of her pocket-handkerchiefs. Strange contradictions of the human mind when we remember that the *Signor* G. is a rank revolutionary who would fain down with all titles! Some say she was an opera dancer at Vienna, but without pursuing matters to *this* extremity, it is clear you cannot be too cautious. I trust you will find my information valuable, as I am certain it is strictly reliable, and with kindest regards to yourself and Miss Violet, I remain, dear Miss Baines,

"'Your truly attached
"'JANE LUCAS.

"'P. S.—I shall be writing ere long to our mutual native land, and shall be happy to inform friends in Kent that the Sunny South has effected a beneficial influence on the health of yourself and niece according to the account in your letter.

"'J. L.'"

Violet folded up the letter, and passed the creases backward and forward between her thumb and forefinger. There was a silence, which Miss Baines broke at last by saying, "I wonder!——"

Violet looked up inquiringly.

"I wonder, my dear, which of our friends in Kent Mrs. Lucas knows?"

"Oh! is that all? I thought you were going to say something about the Guarinis."

"N—no; I was thinking—I was wondering whether Mrs. Lucas knew anybody who knows your uncle Joshua."

"Why?"

"Your uncle Joshua is very strict in his principles; and if anything came to his ears about—about my allowing you to visit a person who wasn't quite—quite as correct as we could exactly wish, you know——"

"Aunt Betsy, I don't believe a word of all that story of Mrs. Lucas's! Not a word! Why should we take her witness against people who have been so kind and friendly to us? She doesn't know the Guarinis herself; it's all gossip and hearsay."

"But that respectable gentleman, Violet, by the name of Parkinson, my dear?"

"And what can *he* know? Look here, Aunt Betsy, can you suppose that living in a boarding-house here for a few months would make you acquainted with all the leading people in Rome? Why, just think how it is in London! Did the nobility visit at Phipps's boarding-house?"

"But the Continent is quite different, Violet."

"Well, at all events," returned Violet, with heightened colour, and speaking like a person out of breath, "Captain Masi's word is worth more than Mrs. Lucas's in such a matter. He must know more about his own countrypeople than Mrs. Lucas; and the other night, at the Sweetmans', he spoke quite enthusiastically of Signor Guarini and his wife."

The anxious furrow in Miss Baines's forehead grew deeper, and she rubbed one hand softly over the other with a helpless, irresolute movement. "Your poor dear dead mother trusted me to look after you and take care of you, Violet," said she, at length.

"And so you do! And so you have nearly all my

life, you dear, kind Aunt Betsy!" cried the girl. Then she pushed her low stool close beside the elder woman's chair, and, sitting by her knee, took one of her aunt's lean hands between both her own, and patted it gently. The action was expressive of affectionate protection, and indicated the real, though unacknowledged, relation of the two to each other.

"Well, then, my dear," pursued Miss Baines, with a little tremor in her voice, "it is my duty to be cautious. And even as to—as to Captain Masi, who is a most agreeable person indeed, and, as far as manners go, quite the gentleman——"

"Of course he's a gentleman, Aunt Betsy!"

"But, my dear, we don't know very much about him, do we?"

"We know we met him at Mrs. Sweetman's, and she introduced him to you, and she knew his grandmother, who was an Irish lady, and Mrs. Sweetman is respectable enough, I hope?"

"But we don't visit Captain Masi's family——"

"How can we?" interrupted Violet, impetuously. "His father and mother are dead, and his relations live ever so far away in the Abruzzi."

"Yes; no doubt. But, then, there it is! We *don't* know his family; and perhaps—although his manners are truly what may be called fascinating, I admit—perhaps it is not exactly prudent to take his word about the Guarinis."

"Do you think he is capable of deceiving us, Aunt Betsy?"

"No, no!" returned Miss Baines, repudiating the suggestion with a shocked look. "But he is a bachelor, and he may not think of things exactly as we do. And then, Violet, as Mrs. Lucas says, Continental manners are different from ours—not so strict."

"So some people say, Aunt Betsy. But it seems to me that they are stricter. At home I can go out by myself, and everybody thinks it quite natural. But here it is not considered proper. Signora Guarini told me so herself."

"A Signore wants you," said a rough, loud voice at the door.

The speaker was the servant of the house, a thick-set country girl, to whom the machinery of door-handles was as yet a complex mystery of civilization only to be mastered by main force, and who habitually burst into the room with a sudden violence which was one of Miss Baines's standing grievances.

The poor lady started, and put her hand to her heart. "Oh, dear me!" she murmured, "I wish Mariuccia could be taught to move gently. But I can't make her understand me."

Mariuccia meanwhile stood, with the door in her hand, quite unmoved.

"Who is it?" asked Violet.

"I don't know. I told him to come in, but he said I was to ask you first."

"Didn't he give his name? Where is he?"

"Here he is," replied Mariuccia, with a jerk of the head over her shoulder. And then Violet caught sight of a man standing in the doorway close behind her. Violet sprang to her feet, blushing to the temples, and hastily passed her hands over her hair. "Oh! it's Captain Masi, Aunt Betsy," she said. "Please to walk in. The servant is so stupid."

Captain Masi entered the room, and paused just within the threshold to bow to its inmates. It was a formal bow, with heels drawn together, and head bent low—a bow such as Miss Baines was not accustomed to receive, and which considerably embarrassed her. She was fluttered by this visit altogether. She and her niece had met Captain Masi several times, and on the day after his first introduction to them he had left his card, according to the custom of his countrymen. But although they had become almost familiar with him, he had never been in their house before. Miss Baines rose from her seat, and held out her hand, and half drew it back again, and finally resigned it timidly to the grasp of her visitor.

Mario Masi, Captain in the 99th Regiment of Infantry, was a man of six-and-thirty years old, an Italian of the South, dark-eyed, dark-haired, brown-skinned. In spite of the short military crop, his hair curled in close rings round his forehead, and was sufficiently thick to dissimulate in some measure the defective development of the back of the head, which rose in an almost perpendicular line from the spine. This want of balance between the brow and the hinder part of the skull is an ancient heritage of Captain Masi's countrymen, as any collection of classical portrait busts will prove. He was upright, well-proportioned, perfectly at his ease, whether in movement or in repose, and his smile had an expression of good-humoured enjoyment which was very winning.

"I hope you will excuse me for coming," said he, speaking in fluent English, and with a singularly agreeable tenor voice. "I understood that you would receive in the evening."

"Oh, no! I mean, of course, now we are at home, we are happy to see you. But, as a rule, we don't exactly what you Italians call 'receive,'" rejoined Miss Baines, considerably fluttered.

"Is not that an English expression?" asked Masi, seating himself. "You say 'receive,' don't you?"

"Oh! yes; but it means more of a party—at least reception does. I mean it would sound rather too grand for us to talk about 'receiving' of an evening. Violet, can't you explain to Captain Masi? I'm afraid he doesn't quite catch my meaning."

Violet had left the footstool, and seated herself on the opposite side of the hearth to her aunt, a little in shadow.

"Thanks, thanks; I quite understand," said Masi, who did not understand at all, but was not interested in catching the exact shade of Miss Baines's meaning. "Besides the pleasure to see you, I had another reason for coming this evening. The Signora Guarini charged me with a note to Miss Moore."

The aunt and niece exchanged a guilty look, as though they had been detected in an unhandsome action.

"Oh, thank you?" said Miss Baines. And "Oh, thank you!" echoed Violet, more faintly.

"The Signora Nina is so anxious that you should go to her to-morrow. She was afraid you might forget. Here is the note," said Masi, drawing it forth from a breast-pocket. Violet took it from his hand. It was a little cream-coloured note, with a monogram in gold and crimson, and strongly perfumed. Whilst Violet read it, Miss Baines, stringing up her resolution to the height of her responsibilities, said: "It's very kind indeed of Signora Guarini, but I'm afraid we shan't be able to go."

Masi looked at her, and thought within himself, "This is a true specimen of the stiff and rigid Englishwoman. What a type!" He had been acquainted with many English people, and piqued himself on understanding their peculiarities. Poor Betsy Baines, who was the meekest of women, was at the same moment inwardly quaking at her own boldness in refusing to do anything which other people wished she should do.

"Not go!" exclaimed Masi. "Oh, you must go! Why not go?"

"I think—I'm afraid—we're engaged."

"Oh, that is nothing! You go to your other *soirée* first, and come to *la* Signora Nina afterwards. People arrive quite late—after the theatre."

"But we don't like late hours."

"What for? You sleep next day as long as you like!"

Violet handed the note to her aunt. "Perhaps you had better see what Signora Guarini says, Aunt Betsy," she said. The note was as follows:—

"DEAR VIOLETTA,

"Our good Masi will carry this to you to remind of to-morrow evening. You have never been to my house yet in the evening, and to-morrow I

expect some persons of distinction that you will like to see. You will not fail me, *carissima*, and your good aunt, to whom say so many things! I shall send the *coupé* for you, if you tell me the hour. Masi will bring me the answer. *A Lundi!*

"*Vôtre dévouée,*
"N. G."

"Oh, dear, I couldn't think of troubling the Signora to send the carriage for us!" exclaimed Miss Baines.

"What trouble? It is not the Signora Nina who draws the *coupé!*" retorted Masi, with an easy smile. "Oh, you must go! It is not dull. You will amuse yourselves. It will be something new for you to see."

Violet had been silent all this time. Now she raised her eyes, and said: "If we did go, it would be for the sake of seeing Madame Guarini, who has been very kind to us."

"Oh, she is charming, *la* Signora Nina!"

"You have known her some time, Captain Masi?"

"Ever since I came to Rome. More than two years."

"And her husband, too, I suppose?"

"Oh, Beppe! Yes; he is an old acquaintance. I knew him in Sicily long ago. He is a *buon diavolo, povero Beppe!*"

Miss Baines, following Violet's lead, as she did in most matters, here put in a question which she considered to be profoundly diplomatic: "Did your family visit the Guarinis, Captain Masi?"

"My family! Oh, dear me, my family would think it a horror to be in the same room with them!" answered Masi.

This reply was so entirely unexpected that Miss Baines remained for a few moments speechlessly staring at him. At length she feebly asked: "Why?"

"Oh! my family are quite different—those of them who are left. There's only my uncle, Don Gennaro, and my married sister. My uncle is really a good man, though he is a priest. We never talk of politics. Ah, if all the Clericals were like Don Gennaro——"

Miss Baines's thoughts were concentrated on the one important point; and the moment Masi paused, she said, with tremulous solemnity: "Don't your family consider the Guarinis *respectable*, Captain Masi?"

"Oh! they are quite on the other side, you see, and they don't know how the world goes. Just fancy how they live! In such a small place!" Then he turned to Violet, and said, smilingly: "What time shall I tell the Signora Nina to send the *coupé*?"

Before she could reply, her aunt interposed: "Oh, Violet will write to the Signora. Pray don't trouble yourself! Thank you all the same for being so kind as to offer."

Masi looked at her, puzzled and curious, but he did not persist in pursuing the subject. Greatly to Miss Baines's relief, he began to speak of other things, addressing himself more and more to Violet. Gradually their voices dropped into a murmur barely audible to Miss Baines as she sat on the opposite side of the fire knitting a woollen cuff. The warmth and the low-toned conversation, of which she only caught a word here and there, made her drowsy; and she started from a doze when Masi rose to go away. "Well, I'm glad I held out, Violet," said she, as soon as the door had closed behind him. "You heard what he said—that his family wouldn't sit in the same room with such people! I don't understand how Captain Masi can expect us to visit them."

"Oh, but that's all political! You don't understand, Aunt Betsy You didn't hear what Captain Masi was saying, did you?"

"I was not *asleep*, Violet, although I may have closed my eyes to rest them," returned Miss Baines, with a slight touch of temper.

"No, no; I dare say you were not asleep. But still you didn't hear all he was saying about the Guarinis. They are quite celebrated people—so patriotic. And she has been so devoted to her husband, was with him in his campaigns and everything! And their house

is frequented by the most interesting people; and the Signora Nina is of noble birth. Her father was a Polish Count, who was exiled, and taught languages in Paris, because he never would give in to the Government; and Mrs. Lucas's stupid old man knew nothing about them at all. The idea of spreading such wicked gossip!"

Violet poured this all out in breathless excitement, and her aunt felt as though she were being carried off her feet by a sudden tide. "Dear me," she said, "I wish we knew what to believe!"

"Believe the people we know, and not the people we don't know! Besides, I should think we can form some judgment for ourselves. We're not babies!" said Violet, with the superb confidence of youth in its own infallibility.

"We'll talk it over quietly to-morrow, my dear," replied Miss Baines. "I think I shall go to bed now."

It was equivalent to striking her colours.

CHAPTER II.

MANY people in Rome talked much evil of the Guarinis, but their friends were enthusiastic in their praise. There seemed to be no cool medium in the opinions about them. The most terrible accusations were roundly preferred against Guiseppe Guarini. He had speculated dishonestly on the Bourse; he had made money unlawfully in that affair of the Scaricalasino Railway concession; he had brought in the Opposition candidate at Borgo Piccino by bribery, and had taken bribes to do it; he had been mixed up with the Socialistic agitation in the Marche; and suspected of having been the intimate friend and confidant of that cashier of a Clerical bank who absconded to America with two millions. Some persons declared

that he was the real proprietor of the *Star of Progress*, a newspaper whose programme comprised absolute liberty of opinion for all laymen, and the immediate decapitation of every bishop, priest, and deacon, of whatsoever denomination, who should refuse to abjure his creed. Other people maintained that he had put a large sum of money into the *Rome of the Romans*, a journal established to advocate the restoration of the temporal power. His enemies asked where the money came from to be invested in this or that speculation, and recalled the time when Beppe Guarini might have been seen haunting second-rate *cafés* in a threadbare coat, and with a halfpenny cigar between his teeth. His friends replied that, if Beppe had been threadbare at the time referred to, it was because he had spent a goodly inheritance in the cause of Italy, and that of the money he now possessed part had come to him with his wife, and part had been acquired by legitimate and judicious business transactions.

Money he had, undoubtedly. The Signora Nina drove an extremely well-appointed *coupé* of almost ostentatious simplicity—the panels dark green, with a tiny cipher formed of the initials G. N. G., and the harness without glitter. But the horse, a splendid bay, was frequently honoured by that long, grave, almost solemn gaze of critical attention peculiar to the professed judge of horseflesh, and which, contrasted with his usually *nonchalant* attitude towards his fellow-creatures, serves partly to express his sense of the relative importance of men and horses. The interior of the little vehicle was extremely luxurious. It was well hung, well lined, and had a soft fleecy rug, into which the feet sank pleasantly. It was fitted up with various small contrivances for comfort on which thought and money had been plentifully expended; and its occupant, rolling smoothly along, enjoyed an amount of bodily ease which might have excited the envy of the illustrious Principessa Nasoni or the fashionable Marchesa del Ciuffo, as they trundled past in their

high, clumsy old coaches. The poor old Princess, indeed, had seldom been so comfortable in all her life as Nina Guarini expected to be all day, and every day. The Princess lived hard, and lay hard, and rose early, and never had a fire in her own apartment from year's end to year's end. And if she was rigid to her family and dependants, she certainly set them an example of Spartan fortitude in her own person. The Marchesa del Ciuffo, for her part, would willingly have enjoyed all the personal indulgences which the Signora Nina allowed herself. But she was not rich enough to be both grand and comfortable; and, having to choose, she chose grandeur.

Meanwhile Madame Nina, nestling in a corner of her well-cushioned *coupé*, with one neatly-shod foot crossed over the other, and half buried in the fleecy rug, smiled to herself at the haughty airs of the Marchesa and the bony sternness of the Princess, who both ignored her with some elaboration.

"That poor old creature is starving herself to death, I do believe!" was her irreverent comment on the Princess, as she passed. "And as to that dreadful del Ciuffo, would any one believe without seeing it that a sane woman *could* paint herself so badly? *Elle se grime.* And she really has points, too. If she were well got up, she wouldn't look at all bad."

La Nina was always well got up. Her dress, like her carriage, was ostentatiously simple in form and colour; but it was cut to perfection, and carefully finished in the minutest details. As to her face, whatever toilet mysteries were devoted to it left it smooth and fresh-looking. She could stand the daylight without flinching. She was a small, slight woman, with exquisite hands and feet. She had brilliant dark eyes, irregular piquant features, and abundant black hair falling in short wavy masses over her forehead. It was an attractive face: frank and animated. Only the occasional sarcastic curve of the corners of her mouth warned you, if you were an intelligent observer,

that Madame Nina's flattering cordiality of manner did not imply so blind an admiration of your perfections as you might at first suppose. Nevertheless, she was very popular with the frequenters of her salon, which was always well filled whenever she chose to open it.

The apartment occupied by the Guarinis was not palatial, but it was commodious and cheerful. There were three reception-rooms. The first was very small, but it sufficed to hold a table where refreshments were served; and, to economize space, a low divan ran all round the walls, which were hung with chintz of the same pattern as that which covered the divan—a pearl-grey ground with delicate pink flowers straying over it. From this opened a large drawing-room. A pianoforte stood in one corner of it rising out of a *parterre* of flowers in pots. One oil painting hung on the wall above the piano. It was a pretty group of the Madonna and Child with St. Joseph. Beppe Guarini called it an Andrea del Sarto. Here and there a small table held a few costly toys and knick-knacks. There were *jardinières* full of plants in the embrasure of each window, and a profusion of cut flowers in every available vase and cup. An extraordinary variety of comfortable seats was disposed about the room. There were not two alike, except in the quality of being luxuriously easy The third room was the especial sanctum of the mistress of the house, although it looked very unlike a lady's boudoir. She called it the study; and, in order to justify its title, there were in it a few shelves filled with books, and a solid and well-appointed writing table covered with papers. It was the only room of the suite which had an open fire-place; and on its marble hearth a cheerful wood fire burned every evening. Here, too, choice flowers filled every available space, and made the air heavy with their rich perfume. The plain gray walls were nearly hidden by prints and photographs, mostly portraits, and many of them bearing the autograph of the original, with dedications in

various languages to Nina Guarini. A wide settee was drawn close to the fire-place on one side. On the other side stood a low rocking-chair, with a little round table beside it supporting a shaded lamp and a Parisian machine for making cigarettes. This rocking-chair, which faced the doorway, and commanded a view of the drawing-room, was the peculiar seat of the Signora Nina. When she wished to secure the privacy of the study, she had merely to let down heavy curtains which hung over the doorway communicating with the drawing-room; and this hint was understood and respected by the *habitués* of the house. The furniture of the apartment was neither "æsthetic" nor "antiquarian." Everything in it was modern, including the Andrea del Sarto. But although its decorations would have been sternly condemned by that influential minority who alone know what good taste is, and who have (until further notice at least, for even the taste of influential minorities is not immutable in this fleeting world!) banished as far as possible colour and gilding from the eyes of civilized man, yet it must be said for the Guarini's upholsterer that his colours were good colours and his gilding good gilding.

But if the furniture of the apartment did not go beyond the conventional and commonplace elegance of any ordinary Parisian house, the guests who populated it on most evenings of the week were of a sufficiently original and varied character. The Guarinis professed themselves to be entirely democratic. Dress coats and white cravats were not necessary for admission to the Signora Nina's receptions, although plenty were to be seen sprinkled among the crowd. Men dropped in there on their way from the club or the theatre, or after dining at the restaurant, and brought news of the latest doings in the Chamber, the most recent utterances of Ministers and ex-Ministers; how the election struggle in a north Italian borough was going, and what fresh proofs of popular discontent and governmental mismanagement were arriving from Sicily

and Sardinia. Although the black and white uniform of society was dispensed with, almost every man was well dressed. There were no shabby, no threadbare, no unbrushed garments:—unless it might be now and then in the case of Don Francesco Nasoni, Duca di Pontalto, commonly called Ciccio Nasoni, who, having deserted the Catholic and Conservative principles of his illustrious family, was sometimes carried away by the zeal of a convert even to the point of wearing dirty boots. But this method of professing democratic convictions did not find favour with the majority. Several of the more distinguished among the Radical and Republican politicians were remarkable for the whiteness of their linen, the fineness of their broadcloth, and the glossiness of the chimney-pot hat which they invariably carried in their hands. There was no air of *la Bohème* about them. A few minutes' observation of the crowd sufficed to show that it was composed of heterogeneous social elements, but it would have been impossible for a stranger to assign to each man his real place. Beppe Guarini himself, a roundabout little man, with a shining bald head and smooth-shaven chin, looked rather like a contented cheesemonger in easy circumstances than an ex-conspirator and fiery partisan of the Universal Republic. Dr. Angelo Angeloni, one of the most uncompromising members of the Extreme Left, with his severe aristocratic profile and courtly manners, had the air of a diplomat of the *ancien régime*. The high-born Ciccio Nasoni, slow of wit and clumsy of person, had inherited nothing distinctive from his ancient lineage except the flaxen hair and pale blue eyes derived from a Teutonic ancestress with sixteen quarterings. One or two men, such as Gino Peretti, the great olive-oil merchant, and Telemaco Bini, Deputy for Porto Moresco, displayed a certain disdain of conventionality. Peretti, a huge, noisy man, and a well-known demagogue, was frankly vulgar. Bini, dark as an Arabian, black-browed, lean, and bilious, wore long flowing locks, and a red shirt peeping from beneath his

double-breasted velvet jacket. But Bini had never had the good fortune to exchange a shot in his country's cause, although he had written many fiery pages about it in the newspapers. Carlo Silvotti, whose father was a Genoese shopkeeper, and who had run away from college as a boy of sixteen to fight under Garibaldi, and had volunteered for every desperate service in all the patriotic wars ever since, was dressed like a *petit maître*, wore a flower in his button-hole, and affected a particular care of his hands.

Among these divers specimens of mankind, the fairer half of humanity was scarcely represented at all. Frequently the Signora Nina was the only woman present. Sometimes as many as half-a-dozen other ladies might be counted; but such occasions were rare. La Nina, perfectly at her ease, and quietly mistress of the situation, dominated the masculine crowd without an effort. Her influence permeated the mass with the intangible force of an aroma. Each man thought himself to be saying and doing just what he pleased; but every man said and did a little differently from that which he would have said and done if Nina Guarini had not been there. Many persons who repeated scandalous stories about the Guarinis would have found their house—could they have gained admission to it—disappointingly dull. Politics, religion, and sociology were discussed with the utmost freedom, but the *sans gêne* which reigned there had certain limits which were never passed. Ciccio Nasoni, albeit not gifted with quick perceptions, had early found out that La Nina would not permit such freedoms of speech as passed current for wit in the *salons* of the fashionable Marchesa del Ciuffo, or the brilliant Madame Xavier; and that, moreover, although a man might to some extent treat Beppe Guarini *de haut en bas*, any attempt at assuming a similar attitude towards his wife was apt to result in a jar of that peculiarly disconcerting sort which is felt when, expecting to make a step downward, we suddenly plant our foot on the level. This kind of

moral ascendancy, added to the phenomenon—unprecedented in his experience—of a pretty woman who made herself agreeable without expecting any devotion, real or sham, in return, had quite subjugated Ciccio. But perhaps the Signora Nina's greatest triumph consisted in occasionally persuading him that she wished to hear his spontaneous opinion on some question of the day, and in making him imagine that he gave it.

About half-past ten o'clock on a certain Tuesday evening in November, some dozen men were scattered about the Guarinis' drawing-room and in the little chintz saloon. The hour was yet early for that society There was the kind of lull which prevails in a half-filled theatre before the lights are fully turned up, when people speak low and lean back lazily in their stalls. The shaded lamps, the softly-cushioned seats, the perfume of flowers, the tempting array of fragrant tea and coffee, and delicate cakes, and foreign wines, set forth with glittering silver, and dainty china, and white damask mellowed to an ivory tint under the golden lamplight, all conduced to a state of indolent enjoyment. Voices were hushed. Men spoke together in groups of two or three, lolling luxuriously on the broad divan round the tea-table. Some were reading the newspapers of the day. One or two sipped a cup of coffee. Telemaco Bini was devouring little sweet cakes one after another, with a gloomy and preoccupied brow, as though his mind were too busy with great matters to take count of half-a-dozen maccaroons more or less. The curtain hung down before the door of the study, whence issued the smell of cigars, and a murmur of voices. The Guarinis had been giving a little dinner to Monsieur Jules Bonnet, formerly a leading member of the Paris Commune, and a great apostle of Socialism. The host and hostess with their distinguished guest, and one or two fortunate individuals invited to meet him, were enjoying their after-dinner coffee and cigars, and had not yet showed themselves to the exoteric

circle. Into this outer world Pippo, the Guarinis' confidential servant, presently ushered Miss Baines and her niece. He conducted the ladies into the drawing-room, which was nearly empty, set chairs for them, and then went into the study to inform his mistress of their arrival—a proceeding observed with some curiosity by the old frequenters of the house, who were not accustomed to see the mystic curtain lifted except by the Signora Nina herself. But Pippo knew what he was about, and doubtless had his orders.

CHAPTER III.

Miss Baines looked as strange and scared as though she had been dropped from another planet into the Guarinis' drawing-room. To many persons far bolder and more self-confident than she, it is depressing to hear only an unknown foreign language talked around them. On timid Betsy Baines it had the effect of a nightmare. She felt oppressed, cut off, walled up, as it were, from her fellow-creatures: practically deaf and dumb, or reduced to the condition of a lower animal. And in fact she glanced at the faces of these fluent foreigners with a sort of dog-like wistfulness. Violet, though shy also, was interested, and a little excited. She understood a good deal of what was being said, as she caught a phrase here and there. And the nervousness, which only increased her aunt's awkward stiffness of demeanour, was rather embellishing to Violet. It heightened her colour, and brightened her eyes. Her pure complexion asserted itself victoriously against the trying juxtaposition of a white gown slightly open at the throat. And the sleeves, which reached only to the elbow, revealed round young arms of a creamy fairness. The men in the outer room asked each other in whispers, or in dumb show, who these strangers might be. And Telemaco Bini paused in the act of

demolishing the last cake on the dish to gaze with gloomy admiration on the blonde "Meess" as she passed him.

In a few minutes the Signora Nina came hurrying into the drawing-room with both hands extended. "Dear Miss Baines, how kind! *Violetta carissima*, what a pleasure to see you!" The little lady had advanced, intending to kiss Miss Baines on both cheeks; but with her accustomed quickness of eye she detected a shy shrinking movement on the part of her guest, and changed the greeting into a cordial shake of the hand.

"I'm afraid we are too early, Madame Guarini," said Miss Baines.

"Not at all! We had been chatting a little too long over our coffee after dinner. I ought to have been here to receive you. Beppe will come in a moment. He was in a deep discussion with Jules Bonnet, who is a very dear old friend of mine. Of course you know all about Jules Bonnet." Then seeing in Miss Baines's countenance that she had never heard the name in her life before, Nina added quickly, "But I am not going to let you be bored with politics. Tell me what you have been doing since we met at Geneva. Have you been seeing Rome—the galleries, the statues? Foreigners always know more about these things than we do who live here."

Miss Baines answered in little murmured "Yes's" and "No's"; all the while taking accurate note of Madame Guarini's toilet: a black velvet dress, which, as Miss Baines said to herself, "fitted like her skin," with a little *fichu* of yellow old lace "worth five guineas a yard." The Signora on her part was making mental comments of a disparaging nature on Miss Baines's attire. "A lilac silk gown trimmed apparently by the coachmaker, and that cap with cabbage roses on the top of her grey hair! Why does she wear roses? And why will Englishwomen put on those hideous caps which have no relation to the shape of their heads? And how do they make them stick on at that impos-

sible angle? Are they, perhaps, nailed through to the skull?"

Violet's appearance was approved of. "Gown badly cut, but she has a fine natural figure which no dressmaker can quite spoil. And very few skins could stand that dead white." Such was the Signora Nina's verdict.

It was rather difficult to dispose of Miss Baines. She could speak no language but her own, and was chary of speaking that with strangers. And Nina could not remain by her side and talk to her the whole evening. At length she caught sight of old Giorgi, immersed in a newspaper. Giorgi had been a *carbonaro* in his time; had been lamed by a Bourbon bullet and escaped from a Bourbon prison; had fled from Naples, and had got his living as a teacher of languages in London for twenty years. Giorgi was ordered up to converse with Miss Baines, who, alarmed by his fierce eyebrows and snuffy moustache, faintly begged that the gentleman might not be disturbed on her account.

Then Nina looked around on her assembled forces, and considered within herself whom she should select for the privilege of being presented to Violet. Telemaco Bini looked vainly for a sign. He was passed over without mercy. So with several others. The rooms were beginning to fill up. Gino Peretti bustled in, bringing with him a strong odour of tobacco, and talking and laughing loudly. Presently Dr. Angeloni was seen dipping his aquiline profile into a large cup of tea, side by side with the broad, yellow, smooth-shaven face and cropped grey hair of Jules Bonnet. They had both issued forth from the study in company with their host. Four or five Deputies, who had been dining together after the afternoon sitting of the Chamber, entered in a group. Still Nina hesitated. She delivered up Violet into the temporary charge of her husband, and made a tour of inspection. At length her bright eyes rested on Ciccio Nasoni just as he entered the tea-room. That renegade scion of a noble house,

contrary to his usual custom, was in full evening dress, carried an opera hat in his hand, and his rather blank pale face and lack-lustre blue eyes looked over a wide expanse of spotless shirt and white cravat.

"Good evening, Don Ciccio," said the mistress of the house, resigning her delicate jewelled hand to be bowed over. "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere."

"Then where are you going?"

"To the Carlovingis' I can't get out of it."

"I wonder they will condescend to receive you! What is that ribbon sticking out of your waistcoat pocket?"

"Eh? Oh! that's my Order of St. Boniface. I shall have to put it on at the Carlovingis'. My grandmother is to be there."

"Ah! And meanwhile you hide it! Well, hide it a little better. Don't let Angeloni catch sight of it. I saw the Princess to-day on the Pincian."

"My grandmother?"

"Yes. She looked very much fagged. No doubt you worry her to death with your backslidings. Now come here. I am going to present you to a pretty young lady."

"I *must* be off by eleven, Signora Nina!" returned the young man.

"And it now wants a quarter. Never fear, the young lady will be tired of you long before eleven. Mademoiselle Moore, will you allow me to present to you the Duke of Pontalto?"

Violet bowed, blushed, smiled, and showed her bewitching dimple. The bow was for Don Francesco, but the blush and the smile were for Captain Masi, who appeared at that moment in the doorway. As for Miss Baines, who had caught the words "Duke of Pontalto," she was overcome by surprise and joy. The Continental nobility might not be quite so good as ours, but a Duke was a Duke. Little had she, Elizabeth Baines, expected ever to meet a Duke on

equal terms! She felt a shock, as of one who has escaped a danger, when she reflected that she had very nearly allowed Mrs. Lucas to deprive her of this distinction. Giorgi began to think this wooden-faced old lady a more intelligent woman than he had at first supposed; for she assumed an appearance of rapt attention whilst he expounded to her the fundamental absurdities and disadvantages of a hereditary legislative assembly; and how impossible it would be for the Continental nations to submit to such a yoke as that of the British aristocracy. "You see I do know how it is in England. A lord is everything with you. You prostrate yourselves. It is a nonsense."

"Quite so, I'm sure," murmured Miss Baines, politely. She had just finished composing the phrase in which to announce in her next letter to Mrs. Lucas that she had met the Duke of Pontalto "in society."

Ciccio Nasoni spoke English fairly well, having had an English Jesuit priest for his tutor, and he had met with a few English Catholics in his grandmother's house. But the main tide of British tourists naturally streamed past the old Princess Nasoni's door, and never overflowed the threshold. He had not experience enough to judge of Miss Moore's social status by her manners and her accent. That the former were gentle and the latter correct, seemed to him to argue that she must belong to the upper classes! Don Ciccio had never been in England.

Violet's father had been a country surgeon, and her mother a tradesman's daughter. The latter had died when Violet was still a baby; and the girl's ideas about her mother were derived only from her father's loving talk, and from a photograph representing a pretty young woman in a large crinoline. When Mr. Moore died his orphan daughter went to live entirely under the care of her Aunt Betsy in Dozebury; paying occasional visits to a certain great-uncle, Joshua Higgins, who was the rich man of the family, and a seedsman and corndealer in a large way of business. Violet

knew none of her father's kindred, but she had a vague idea that the Moores looked down on the Baineses; and a very distinct idea that whereas the Baineses had been kind to her father and herself, the Moores had never done anything for them whatever.

As commonly happens, the girl had received a better education than her relatives of the preceding generation. She and her aunt had now been travelling on the Continent for more than a year. Miss Baines had suffered from an obstinate bronchitis, for which her doctor, not knowing what else to do with her, had prescribed travel and change of air. At first her projects had not ranged beyond Devonshire or the Isle of Wight. But spurred on by Violet, who longed to travel, she had ventured to cross the Channel. Their first stage, after a few days in Paris, was Montreux, on the Lake of Geneva, where the winter was passed. Thence by degrees they had pushed on southward, until at length, almost to her own surprise, Miss Betsy Baines found herself in Rome. Her health had certainly improved since leaving England, and she made much of this point in her letters home. But at the same time she always remarked that she must still remain abroad a little longer, and that to return to England before the mild weather was fully established would be to risk having her bronchitis all over again. In fact, however, Miss Baines would willingly have gone home even in the heart of the winter, but she yielded to Violet's wish to protract their stay abroad; and no excuse save illness would have availed with Uncle Joshua. He had never cordially approved these foreign travels, often observing that *he* had never crossed the Channel in his life, and yet look at him! There he was, turned seventy, and hadn't passed a day in bed from illness for better than forty years. It was desirable to conciliate Uncle Joshua, and so Miss Baines made much of her weak health and delicate throat, it being tacitly understood that Uncle Joshua would the more easily forgive his niece for visiting Italy if he

could be convinced that she was not much able to enjoy it.

Of all these humble details the Duke of Pontalto had not the slightest suspicion. But, in talking with the English "Meess," he soon discovered that she knew nobody in his world.

"Do you go to the Quirinal?" he inquired.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Violet, with emphatic humility, anxious to disclaim any false pretences. He mistook her humility for another feeling.

"Oh! you don't go to the Quirinal? Then I suppose you belong to our side?"

"I don't know which your side is," answered Violet, innocently.

He looked at her for a moment, doubtful whether a sarcasm were intended. Then he said: "Oh! I have my own ideas. But, of course, my family are black."

Violet understood enough of Roman phraseology to know that this meant that the house of Nasoni adhered to the cause of the Pope. So she bent her head, and said: "Oh, yes; I see."

"But," continued Don Ciccio, "I presume, by-the-bye, that you would not be here if you were one of ours—of theirs. The Guarinis are quite red. I suppose you know?"

"I know what you mean."

"You're not red?"

"I have no colour at all," answered Violet, unable to help laughing.

Don Ciccio remained as grave as a judge. "Many English ladies take interest in politics," said he. "Even young ladies. Did you know Lady Mary Fitzpotter?"

"No, I did not know Lady Mary Fitzpotter."

"She was quite a *femme politique*. Does not your mamma take interest in politics?" with a glance at Miss Baines, who was apparently absorbed in listening to Giorgi's theories about universal suffrage.

"That lady is my aunt. I don't think she knows

much about politics; and we are not people of sufficient consequence to set up for belonging to any party."

Don Ciccio regarded her with his melancholy stare. "I don't object to women taking interest in politics," said he, with grave condescension.

"Don't you?"

"No. I hold advanced opinions. I'm a *progressista*. I mean to be a Deputy:—what you call a Member of Parliament. I shall sit on the Extreme Left."

"Oh, shall you?" said Violet rather absently. Her attention was straying to a distant part of the room, where their hostess was holding an animated conversation with Captain Masi. Don Ciccio languidly followed the direction of her glance. "Isn't Madame Guarini fascinating?" said Violet quickly.

"She has a great deal of *esprit*. How long have you known her?"

"Since last summer."

"Where did you meet her?"

"At Geneva, in the hotel. My aunt was ill, and she was very kind. Isn't she beautiful?"

The young man slowly turned his pale blue eyes on Violet before replying, as though to ascertain whether the question were put in good faith. Then he said with his usual deliberate drawl, "No; not beautiful. Too thin and too short. She is a great friend of mine. She is a very clever woman. She understands what you say to her on almost any subject."

At the same moment the subject of this flattering eulogy looked across the room at them and held up a warning forefinger.

"The Signora Nina is reminding me that I have to go," said the Duke of Pontalto, but without stirring from his seat. "I must go directly."

"Yes," said Violet, who took the announcement with composure.

"Yes. I ought to be in the Palazzo Carlovingi at this moment. Do you ever go to the Carlovingis'?"

"Oh, no! I don't know them at all. We know very few people."

Nina now came up to them with Mario Masi. "Come, Don Ciccio," said she with her little resolute air, "I sympathize with your reluctance, but you must tear yourself away."

Don Ciccio rose silently, and made Violet a solemn bow.

"You're late, my friend, already," observed Nina, "and it's a great pity that the Princess won't know what a good excuse you had."

Don Ciccio made another solemn bow, and departed without a word.

Nina, as she watched him stalk slowly out of the room, said to Masi in a low voice: "I want him to be at the Carlovingis' to-night, for Peretti has just come in with the news that the Count de Chambord is here *incognito*, and that this *soirée* is a kind of 'Right Divine' party in his honour. I don't believe a word of it. Peretti always has some *coq à l'âne*. But he will for ever persist that he was right unless we had some eye-witness to bring against him." Then to Violet with her sweetest smile, "I have robbed you of your cavalier, *Violetta bella*, and am bound to provide a substitute if you will accept him. Masi, take Miss Moore to get some tea."

Violet, with downcast eyes and heightened colour, placed her gloved hand on the sleeve of Captain Masi's dark blue uniform, and they made their way together to the outer room, which by this time was very full.

There was a continuous and confused sound of voices, with occasional unaccountable *crescendos*, such as you may hear in listening to a waterfall. Groups of men were talking together;—some with rapid eager movements of the hands, often repeating the same gesture over and over again; others with an odd lounging air of expectation, as one may see acrobats, who are waiting for their turn in a circus, accord an indolent and factitiously polite attention to the *artiste* on duty,

but reserve all their vital energies for their own performance. One or two were speaking with earnest eloquence to select listeners, who appeared to take heed of their words. Many of the multifarious accents of the peninsula might be distinguished in the general chorus;—the slender French *u* and clipped consonants of Lombardy; the lisping tones of Venetia, like the soft lapping of the tide; the exquisitely musical vowel sounds, and lazy, slipshod aspirates of the Tuscan; the broad, strong, heavy-footed syllables of the Roman; the thick, blunt-edged accent of Naples confounding *b's* with *p's*, and *t's* with *d's*, full of those peculiar guttural cadences which have such an indefinable suggestion of street *canaille;* and the rapid huddled utterances of the Sicilian, whose speech bubbles to his lips as if it were boiling over. Gino Peretti's voice was heard rising louder and louder, interrupted by bursts of laughter which he led himself. He was telling a story illustrative of his own ignorance, of which he appeared very proud. "So when I heard them talking—Luzzi, and a lot of those fellows—about the dreadful condition of a certain Agger, and how nothing had been done to avert utter ruin, and how much respect was due from Roman citizens to all connected with Servius Tullius, I broke in, and said I, 'Look here! It's no use asking the Government. The Government never did anything for the real patriots. Let's get up a little subscription among ourselves. I'm not as rich as Torlonia, but here's my twenty francs.' 'What for?' says Luzzi, staring at me through his spectacles. 'Why,' says I, 'to help poor Agger, who deserves so well of his country, as his ancestor Servius Tullius did before him!' They roared. But how could I tell that their poor dear Agger they were lamenting about was a wall, or a mound, or whatever the devil it is? I'm not an archæologist!"

There was a chorus of laughter and exclamations. "Oh, come, Peretti, if it isn't true it's well invented. Even you must have heard of the Agger of Servius Tullius?"

"Do you suppose I have time to attend lectures on the antiquities of Rome? As soon as I heard that the Government would do nothing for this unfortunate Agger, I concluded, of course, that he must be a veteran of the patriotic wars."

Masi steered his charge among the crowd as well as he could. He was not particularly well pleased at the duty assigned to him. This girl was all very well to talk to for an hour, *faute de mieux;* but he would have preferred to remain in attendance on Nina Guarini, and to have heard some of the words of wisdom which, doubtless, fell from Monsieur Jules Bonnet and Dr. Angeloni, with whom the little lady was holding an animated conversation. Only ten minutes ago Masi had contradicted some remarks of Madame Nina about Violet's looks. "Tut! she has a common-place English school-girl face that says nothing; and her figure is not well made."

"My dear Masi! it is her gowns that are not well made. But, like the rest of the men, you don't know the difference!"

"*Per Bacco!* What will you say next?"

"Well, it's no use disputing. But to-night she is better dressed than usual, and consequently—— However, you shall judge for yourself." And then she had led him up to Violet.

As they stood together just within the tea-room, their further progress being blocked for a moment by the crowd, Gino Peretti, who had just finished his story, bore down in their direction, swaying to and fro, and looking over the heads of those near him. By an instinctive movement Masi pressed closer to Violet to draw her out of the way. As he did so he chanced to glance downward at the fair round arm resting on his own. From thence his eyes wandered to the shining hair, with its warm, rippling lights, to the cream-white throat, framed by the cold white of her dress, the softly-rounded bust and shoulders, the straight young figure, elastic and upright as a vigorous sapling, and it sud-

denly seemed to him as if he had never seen her before. "I am afraid you are uncomfortable in this crowd," said he. "Let me take you in, and find you a seat on the divan. Peretti ought to have a keeper with him! It isn't safe to let such a mass wander about at large amongst the public."

Violet looked up at him with a smile of childlike amusement, blushing and dimpling, her innocent clear eyes shining straight into his. "What can I have been thinking of?" murmured Masi to himself. "She is charmingly pretty!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE odour of hot tea and coffee came in puffs from the table where Pippo and his assistant were serving out these beverages. There was also a smell of wine and sweet cakes in the heated atmosphere, and above all the rich faint perfume of white hyacinths from a vase in the centre of the table. There was a fence of cloth-covered backs all around it. The Signora Nina always provided a great many sweetmeats which were extremely popular. There were delicate little *pâtés*, and ethereal sponge cakes which melted in the mouth; translucent candied fruits from Nice, *nougat* of Marseilles, *panforte* of Siena, crisp confections full of almonds. It was like a feast in one of the Countess d'Aulnoy's stories, where the Prince and Princess sup on sweet jelly and alicampane, with a happy immunity from dyspepsia only to be found in Fairyland. The Signora Nina did not trouble herself about the digestions of her guests. "People," said she, "come to my house after dinner, and cannot be expected to be hungry. But they always like bon-bons and dainties. Men are *gourmands*."

The throng was so thick that it was difficult to move.

People touched each others' shoulders as they stood. Masi conveyed his charge to a seat in an angle of the divan. Every one tried to make way for the young girl, but the passage was not accomplished without difficulty. Masi drew her closer to his side, and guided her along with a new kind of tenderness in his manner replacing his usual nonchalant gallantry. "Are you comfortable?" he asked, as he placed her on the divan. "Is the heat too much for you here?" Violet assured him that she was quite comfortable, and did not mind the heat at all. Masi got a cup of tea for her, and mounted guard whilst she drank it, returning very short answers to his friends' salutations which were more effusive than usual. Telemaco Bini in particular hovered persistently near them, and darted forward officiously to take Violet's tea-cup. "I suppose that is some distinguished person," said she in English, as Bini carried off the empty cup.

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I hardly know;—his general air. He looks like a poet. Or perhaps he is one of Garibaldi's heroes. I see he wears a red shirt."

"Any one can do that!" returned Masi contemptuously.

"But he *is* a celebrated person, isn't he?"

"Not at all,—except in his own opinion. He is a Deputy, and he writes for the newspapers."

"Does he really?" said Violet, turning her head to look again at Bini. Her ideas about Members of Parliament and newspaper writers were much more respectful than Captain Masi's.

"And that handsome elderly gentleman who was speaking with Madame Guarini, who is he?"

"That is Dr. Angelo Angeloni, one of our most celebrated physicians. He has been through many campaigns, so you see he can afford to wear a white shirt."

"And the—the gentleman with the very short grey hair?"

"Jules Bonnet. You have heard of him?"

"I'm afraid not. I am very ignorant. We have always lived so quiet a life. Would it trouble you very much to tell me a little about him?"

Masi sat down by her side, and began to narrate what he knew about the great Monsieur Bonnet. He was rather surprised to find how little that was—only vague reminiscences from the newspapers, and one or two circumstances he remembered to have heard from Nina Guarini. Violet listened, with a puzzled crease in her forehead, trying to understand in what Monsieur Jules Bonnet's greatness consisted. Once she interrupted Masi with an astonished question. "Oh! but was that honest?" she asked.

Masi did not undertake to discuss the point. "I really don't know the details," he said, with a frank gesture of the hands. "No doubt all kinds of rascality went on in Paris at that time. You can't expect such matters to be managed *à l'eau de rose*. And I'm sure the details would not interest you, if I did know them."

The truth was that Masi had a deep-rooted feeling—not a theory, for he had never thought of troubling himself to form one—that women ought chiefly to be interested in subjects which made them interesting to him. He was accustomed to declare, half jestingly, that a woman who reasoned was a horror. But, like other opponents of private judgment, he had no objection to profit by it so long as it was exercised exclusively in his own favour. Poor little Violet Moore ran no present risk of disgusting him by a critical attitude of mind or a preponderance of reason over sentiment. She was the humblest of listeners. But she was not merely humble, she was very happy to sit and be talked to by Captain Masi; and she innocently revealed her happiness in a hundred ways, which their very unconsciousness made exquisitely flattering. Masi soon dismissed M. Jules Bonnet and the Paris Commune. "Don't let us get on the subject of politics. Ladies ought never to trouble their heads about such things, unless they are old and ugly."

"But Madame Guarini does!"

"Oh! *La* Signora Nina is different. She is an exception."

"The Duke of Pontalto said that he approved of women taking an interest in politics."

"Who?"

"The Duke—— Don't I say it right? That gentleman who was talking to me."

"Oh! Ciccio Nasoni. He's an ass!"

"Is he?"

"Did you not find that he is?"

"But he's going into Parliament!"

Masi showed all his white teeth under his moustaches. "That's excellent!" he exclaimed. "I like that 'but'! I assure you Ciccio will not be a solitary specimen of an ass in Parliament if he ever gets there."

"I wonder——" began Violet, and then stopped short.

"*Ebbene?* You wonder——?"

"I mean why does the Duke want to go into Parliament? His family are all on the other side, he told me."

"*That* is why. He wants to spite his father. And another reason is his conceit. He wants to be talked about—to be of importance. He tried writing poetry once, but that didn't do. Almost the only thing you can go into without either brains or education is politics! So he has taken up politics. He talks very much about being a democrat and a Republican, and all that kind of thing, but I have no faith in him. You can't trust these fellows. Besides, Ciccio is too rich. He inherits all his mother's fortune. He'll amuse himself for awhile by playing at being a Red Republican, and then he'll marry, and turn pious, and send his children to the Jesuits to be educated. I know the breed of the Nasonis. All these Roman nobles are alike. They ought to be swept away altogether! *Canaglia!*"

Masi had talked himself into a fit of excitement, following the impulse of his special dislike to the

Nasoni family. All at once the sound of music was heard from the adjoining room. Carlo Silvotti had seated himself at the pianoforte, and was rattling out some airs from "Madame Angot." "Do you like dancing?" asked Masi, with a sudden change of tone, and the childlike enjoying smile which was so winning. And then their conversation rippled on in a confidential undertone to the running accompaniment of Monsieur Lecoq's gaily impertinent melody:

Très joli-i-e,
Peu poli-i-e,
Possedant un gros magot, &c., &c.

The tea-room grew emptier. Some men went away. Of those who remained group after group passed into the drawing-room. A few who considered themselves privileged to do so joined the circle round the mistress of the house. Others had to content themselves with Beppe Guarini, who was discussing the financial policy of the Government with a little knot of Deputies. Many crowded round the piano, urging Carlo Silvotti to play this or that scrap of their favourite operas. Silvotti played entirely by ear, with astonishing spirit and correctness. And he had a remarkable memory, which his friends amused themselves by putting to the test. "The aria from *Aïda*, Carlo!" "Let us have that last polka of Strauss." "Give us some Neapolitan tunes." "No, no; I hate popular melodies; they're all alike. Play the garden scene from *Faust!*" And so on. And Silvotti, with his boyish *insouciant* manner, obeyed these various orders, changing from one style of music to another, welding together the most dissimilar compositions by a few chords, with extraordinary facility.

"Carlo is in vein to-night," said the Signora Nina, in a pause of her own conversation. "Bravo Carlo! Benone! Where is Miss Moore? I want Miss Moore to hear Carlo."

Telemaco Bini stepped forward with the air of a bandit volunteering for a service of danger. Bini was

fond of acting up to his red shirt in private life, and assuming guerilla chieftain attitudes. "I will have the honour to bring the Meess," said he, knitting his brows and tossing his long hair. And with that, he strode off to the tea-room. Violet jumped up like a child who has been caught playing truant, when Bini delivered his message. "Oh, thank you," she said, in her stiff Anglo-Saxon French. "It is very kind in you. I shall like very much to hear the gentleman play." Bini offered his arm, with a tragic inclination of the head, like a stage hero ordered for immediate execution. But Masi, affecting not to notice this, pushed himself between them. "Shall I take you to the drawing-room, Miss Moore?" he said, with his easy, self-assured air. Violet coloured and hesitated. "Don't you think," she said in English, "that I had better go with this gentleman since he has been so kind——?" Masi drew back at once, not quite decided whether to be gravely offended, or loftily cool. But there was a third alternative, as he found. For when Bini, utterly unaccustomed to be in the company of ladies, and horribly embarrassed by the light touch of Violet's hand on his arm, walked off with her, keeping as far away from her as his bent elbow would permit, and turning his eyes solemnly on the ground as though heading a funeral procession, Masi was so tickled by the absurdity of his demeanour, that he fell into a fit of silent laughter, and followed them into the Signora Nina's presence in the highest spirits.

There was a general stir and movement in the drawing-room when Violet entered it. Silvotti did not look up, but his consciousness of the presence of this new auditor quivered in every finger-tip, and gave a new touch and expression to his playing. Monsieur Jules Bonnet made some whispered remark of a complimentary nature about her to his host. Angeloni placed a chair for her near the piano, with his courtliest air and sweetest smile. A very fat Deputy, whose tiny, tightly-shod feet seemed an

absurdly disproportionate base to support his bulk, squeezed himself back against the wall, ostensibly to give Miss Moore an uninterrupted view of the piano, really to give himself an uninterrupted view of Miss Moore. Only Giorgi and Gino Peretti remained indifferent. Giorgi was enjoying the rare luxury of a patient listener. People in general thought Giorgi a bore, and had no particular inducement to conceal their thought. He was shabby, and snuffy, and self-conceited, and of no consequence. His harangues were ruthlessly cut short, his theories pooh-poohed, his experiences set aside as antiquated and out of date. No one thought of making any polite pretences with old Giorgi. But now he had got hold of Miss Baines, who appeared to be enthralled by his eloquence. He abused her country to her with enthusiasm. The monstrous egotism of English policy was one of his favourite themes. He had been fed, and lodged, and clothed by England for many years, and he did not altogether refuse good qualities to individual Britons. They were often, for instance, rich. They were frequently generous. He himself had met with acts of kindness from several of them. But, collectively, the nation was intolerable. It was an amusing, but by no means unprecedented, fact that Giorgi talked in this fashion to English persons, with an implicit confidence in their forbearance which was almost touching. It is certain that he would never have ventured to say half so much against France to a Frenchman, unless he were prepared to quarrel with him. And once, when Nina Guarini had made some remark to that effect, he answered: "*Cara mia!* the English don't care so much what any one thinks of them. They are too stupid!"

Gino Peretti, for his part, rather resented Violet's presence. He disapproved of ladies coming to the Guarinis' receptions. They caused him some constraint. He was divided between a desire to shine and a great ignorance and uncertainty as to what

amount of buffoonery was permissible in the presence of ladies. He had a wife at home in the country, but she had no pretensions to be a lady. She understood the culture of olives extremely well, and knew a great deal about the manufacture of oil, and was an invaluable helpmate to him in his business. She was, moreover, a model to the whole country-side for the vast stores of linen accumulated in her presses, and the punctuality with which she attended to her religious duties. Peretti admired her very much in the capacity of a wife. That was how women ought to be, he considered—or, at all events, wives. Atheism and the higher political convictions were for men.

Peretti went on talking ostentatiously through the music, and looking away from the feminine interloper who diminished his audience. Presently Silvotti left off playing, with a burlesque flourish, and got up from the piano. "There," said he, "I think I have bored you all enough." There was a general movement. Groups broke up, and redistributed themselves. Miss Baines, who had for some time past been timidly wondering how she could get away from Signor Giorgi, was released by the cessation of the music. Giorgi had found his talk agreeably sustained by the accompaniment of Silvotti's playing; and when the playing came to an end he suddenly paused. Miss Baines at once rose from her chair. "You are not going away?" said Giorgi, almost indignantly.

"I'm afraid we really must," answered Miss Baines, hurrying across the room. She felt that there was no safety but in prompt flight, and that a moment's parley would undo her. "I shall come and pay you a visit," said Giorgi, limping after her. Miss Baines went up to their hostess to say "good night."

"Oh, it is quite early yet!" exclaimed Beppe Guarini. "You mustn't go so soon."

"It is twelve o'clock, Signor Guarini," answered Miss Baines; "and I never keep late hours."

Here the Signora Nina interposed. Miss Baines

must not be teased to stay. She had been very kind to come at all. If they were reasonable, and did not ask too much, she might be induced to come again. Violet was surrounded by a little knot of admirers, each of whom gravely shook hands with her when she said "Good night," under the impression that that was the universal English practice. And the fat Deputy, having satisfied himself that she really was on the point of departing, and that there was no chance of his being expected to say any more, boldly uttered three of the dozen syllables which formed his English vocabulary, and exclaimed "Good-bye, Meess," with effusion.

Telemaco Bini alone hovered on the outskirts of the group. Although he could not summon courage to enter into conversation with her, he could not forget that he had performed the feat of giving Miss Moore his arm once that evening, and he was resolved to repeat the achievement. He waited in a kind of ambush, ready to conduct her to her carriage. But Captain Masi frustrated his intentions. Masi went close up to Violet with so decided an air of taking possession of her that every one else drew back. "I am going to have the honour to take you downstairs," said he, in English. His command of her language gave him what Bini felt to be an unfair advantage. Violet smilingly allowed herself to be taken possession of.

"Good night! and thank you so much!" she said to the Signora Nina. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes round and shining. She looked like a happy child. Nina kissed her, and shook hands with Miss Baines, to whom she gave many injunctions about wrapping herself up warmly. "People catch cold in Rome, and take the fever, and then they say it is the climate," said she, accompanying her guests to the door of the ante-room. Here she caught sight of Bini. He was glaring at Masi, who had just placed Violet's cloak on her shoulders. "*Allons*, Bini," said the Signora Nina; "take care of Miss Baines to her carriage. May

I present to you the Deputato Telemaco Bini?" Bini's only consolation, as he marched downstairs with his charge in solemn silence, was that he should be entitled to call on Miss Baines now that he had been formally introduced to her. And by the time he had conveyed her to the hack carriage which was waiting at the door, and roused the sleepy driver, and wrenched open the crazy door of the vehicle—all of which operations were accomplished before Miss Moore and Captain Masi had got downstairs—he felt himself on a comparatively intimate footing with the family.

When the coach jolted away, leaving Bini and Captain Masi standing side by side on the pavement, Violet leaned back silently in her corner of the carriage.

"Did you enjoy yourself, my dear?" asked her aunt, after a little while.

"Oh, so much!" answered the girl, with a little thrill in her voice. Then, almost self-reproachfully, she added, quickly: "But I'm afraid that perhaps you did not, Aunt Betsy? I—I could not get near you all the evening."

"No, indeed; I passed a more agreeable evening than I expected."

"I'm glad of that. I was afraid you might find that lame old gentleman a little tiresome."

"Oh, no. He can talk English, you know; and he seems to be a very clever person." Then, after a pause: "Is he the head of the family, do you think? He seems so very young."

"Who, Aunt Betsy?"

"The Duke of Pontalto, my dear."

CHAPTER V

Long after Violet and her aunt were asleep on that night of their first visit to the Guarinis a cabinet council was sitting in the Signora Nina's study. There were Telemaco Bini, and Jules Bonnet, and Peretti, and Carlo Silvotti, and old Giorgi, whose past sufferings from the Bourbon Government of Naples constituted a claim for admission to the intimate councils of his party, where his advice was seldom listened to, and never taken. Masi went away when Miss Moore had departed; and, in any case, he would not have made one of the select company assembled in the study. He had never been made free of the innermost projects of his Radical friends. He called himself a strong Liberal, but he wore the King's uniform, and he had no idea of wearing it disloyally. He had grown up in a period when the banner of the North-Italian Monarchy had been the banner of revolt; when Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel were comrades fighting for the same cause, and Cavour and Mazzini accomplices conspiring for the same ends. Masi was a man of the South. The enthusiasm of those long-oppressed provinces for those who drove out their jailors and let in the daylight by dint of battering down their prison doors had formed an integral part of his youth, and the impressions of that time could no more be effaced or dimmed in his mind than the halo which transfigured the memory of his mother. He had fought as a boy volunteer under Garibaldi, had swelled the frantic shouts which greeted the Dictator's arrival in Palermo, had cheered the King through the streets of Naples, and welcomed the entry of the Italian troops into Rome as the crowning canto of the great national epic.

This was by no means the tone of mind of the

thorough-going Democrats who frequented Casa Guarini. They were anti-monarchical to a man. With many of them conspiracy had come to be a career, as other men follow medicine or the law. Successes had been attained which twenty years previously would have seemed the "baseless fabric of a vision" to many who now spurned at them, impatient for a further advance. It is difficult to realize whilst we are running that the chase is what allures us, and not the prey. They declared that they had always regarded the union of Italy under one Sovereign as a means, and not an end. Some were sincere in so declaring. Others had no distinct conception as to whither they desired to move; they only wished to keep moving. A taste for felling trees and clearing jungle is a very different thing from a talent for cultivating the cleared land. There were a few sincere enthusiasts who cherished an ideal, and were impatient of the plodding workers in the present—those men of the mean time, who, with humble compromises and concessions to stubborn fact, keep open prosaic safety-valves for all kinds of social ferments. The majority of the smaller fry simply enjoyed the pleasure of being in permanent opposition, an attitude which enabled them to make a great deal of noise with absolutely no expenditure of ideas. Many of Guarini's political friends and satellites had no definite aim in view, except the one persistent aim of turning out the party in power for the time being. There were honest men among them, men who were poor because of their honesty. But it was noticeable and singular that those who were themselves incapable of rascality yet believed in the rascality of all their opponents and some of their partisans.

Amidst all the various aspirations and ambitions of a purely political nature there fermented in certain groups a leaven of less avowable speculations. All kinds of schemes for getting money by the stroke of a Ministerial harlequin's wand—for, in short, solving the problem how to produce something from nothing—

were rife in sundry fervid brains. It was not merely that the commonplace methods of toil and trouble were too slow and unalluring, but there was also at the bottom of their hearts a *mal* sentiment that it was personally unfair to them for the enemy to monopolize all the sweets of dishonesty in power. When the model Republic and Universal Brotherhood of Nations should be victoriously established all men would, of course, have clean hands and scrupulous consciences. But meanwhile it was really too hard that "the Government" should exclusively enjoy the interim crop of monarchical abuses and privileges. Of conspirators made of sterner stuff, and cherishing more dangerously subversive views, there were very few among them. The fervency of patriotic indignation against brutal oppression, which had formerly made men ready to risk life and all that makes life dear, was dying down for want of fuel. If many abuses still remained unremedied. they were not of that sort which stirs the heart of a nation to its depths. The most earnest enthusiasts among the Radical party were one or two men who were filled with a passionate sympathy for the inarticulate sufferings of the peasantry. And philanthropic enthusiasm, though it can move mountains, does not make revolutions.

The present question being discussed in the Guarinis' house was neither philanthropic nor revolutionary. It was at bottom financial. Gino Peretti took to himself the chief credit of having conceived the scheme, but Bini laid claim to some part in it. The fact was it had taken form and shape among them by indefinable degrees, as a cloud grows. The main outline of the project was briefly this:—A certain outlying portion of the Pontine Marshes was to be drained, reclaimed, and planted by a company constituted for that end—was to yield enormous profits to the company, and incalculable benefits to the agricultural poor of the whole district. It is seldom that doing good can be made financially profitable. But here was a scheme, as Peretti declared,

which furnished the means at once of satisfying the consciences and filling the pockets of the benevolent. The demon of malaria was to be expelled from his stronghold, the fever-blighted peasant to be made fat and rosy, the prosperity of unborn generations ensured to Italy in the future, and enormous dividends granted to patriotic shareholders in the present.

"We should only want a small Government grant to start us, and the exclusive concession of all contracts for executing the works—draining, road-making, planting, and so on," said Peretti, with his brassy cheerfulness.

"A grant, h'm? You'll get no grant out of the present men," said Guarini.

"Why not?"

"They can't do it. They've got no money. Besides, they wouldn't venture it just now."

"They never venture anything for the right people," observed old Giorgi, taking snuff, contemptuously. "Look at me! If I had been a friend to the Bourbons or the nephew of a Bishop, I should have been enjoying a fat sinecure by this time. But for a patriot who has been lamed in the cause, and passed a quarter of a century in exile, there is nothing to be found. Why, at this moment in the Municipality——"

Peretti interrupted him unceremoniously. "My dear friend, those are all stories of the year One! It's no use going back to all that. The question is what is to be done in the present. I'm not so sure about our getting no grant, Beppe."

Guarini shook his head. "No, no," said he; "it won't do. The newspapers of the Right would scream like pigs in a slaughter-house! And the Ministry isn't strong enough in the House to defy them on such a point as that."

M. Jules Bonnet, who understood Italian sufficiently to follow the sense of the conversation, here made a practical suggestion. "Why," said he, "should this be

made a political question at all? Could not some members of—of the Clerical party, for instance, be got to come forward with their names as directors of the company? Then the Ministry is at once perceived not to be serving its own friends, but to be forwarding a project useful to the country at large."

"Out of the question," exclaimed Carlo Silvotti, hotly. "Our side would be against the thing to a man if you had one Clerical name on the list. *I* should for one!"

"Nobody would believe that the Clericals wanted anything useful to the country at large," grumbled Giorgi. "You wouldn't catch any of our birds with *that* chaff!"

"Besides," observed Peretti, with an elaborate wink, "we don't mean to let the Reverends have their finger in the dish at all. They're not fools. They won't draw any chestnuts out of the fire for nothing!"

Bonnet shrugged his shoulders. "With us the thing could be managed," said he.

Telemaco Bini began to exalt the admirable nature of the project. With the least little official push from the Ministry, it would be launched successfully; and, once launched, it would swim from success to success.

"Well, you'll get no grant in money," repeated Guarini, puffing out a mouthful of smoke from his cigar. "I can tell you that beforehand."

Silvotti looked quickly at him, and then as quickly at Peretti, who puffed out a bigger volume of smoke than Guarini, and fixed his eyes contemplatively on the ceiling. "Whom does the main part of the land belong to now?" asked Nina, continuing the manufacture of a cigarette, which had apparently been absorbing her attention.

"Ah, *brava, la Signora Nina!*" cried Bini, nodding his head with emphatic approbation. "That's a question to the point—the vital point. The Signora Nina has a wonderful head!"

"Well," asked Nina, perfectly ungrateful for this eulogium, "do none of you know to whom the land belongs? It would have been a blunder not to find out."

Peretti, who never could get over a lurking jealousy of the Signora's feminine influence in their councils, and who was, moreover, a little afraid of her, and consequently owed her a grudge, answered, brusquely: "You need not concern yourself about that, Signora. I'm not apt to make blunders in business."

"Oh, yes, you are, my dear Peretti!" answered Nina, coolly. "Very apt indeed. Most men are. But I will say this for you: you never own it! And that is an advantage."

There was a general laugh, in which Peretti joined with stentorian insincerity

"I know the district pretty well," said Giorgi; "at least if it is the part of the Pontine Marshes which I suppose."

Bini pulled a map out of his pocket, and spread it open on the big writing-table. "There is the bit we want to operate on, to begin with," said he, pointing to a portion of the map more soiled than the rest by frequent fingering, and circumscribed by a red line.

Giorgi put on his spectacles, and contemplated it. "Yes, yes; to be sure," he said. "It is the neighbourhood I thought. Three of us hid there for five days from Bomba's gendarmes."

A group gathered round the old man, with questions and exclamations. For once Giorgi's interminable reminiscences had touched a point of immediate interest.

"Yes," said he; "that is the place. How well I remember the day we got off from Terracina! Mellini had a piece of *ricotta** in his pocket, wrapped in vine-leaves. That's all the food we had among us! Afterwards we got bread from some herdsmen; but

* A preparation of pressed curds.

that wasn't till next day. Towards sundown we were right in the midst of the *paludi*, and we halted to rest. Such a wild scene of desolation! I can see it now. A great shallow pool of water, like a plate of blue steel, the blood-red sun flaming behind a tangle of trees, and one black-muzzled buffalo standing knee-deep in the water, and glaring at us like a devil!"

"Not a healthy spot, eh?" said Silvotti.

"Healthy! The air is slow poison, and the water is quick poison! No one ventures to sleep within five miles of that jungle. Even the buffalo herdsmen trudge farther afield to pass the night, and then they sleep with their heads in the smoke of a fire of green faggots. But we slept there. We were half dead with fatigue, and would have slept on the crater of Vesuvius. Luckily we had a good provision of tobacco in our pockets, and we smoked till we dropped asleep."

"And the fever—did none of you take the fever?" asked Silvotti.

"Of course, we all took it. Poor Mellini died of it at last, weeks afterwards. The other man and I struggled through. I believe the reason was that we refrained from drinking the water of that shallow pool. I knew that was poison; but Mellini, poor boy, was young and impetuous, and he was parched with thirst. He lay down on his stomach at the edge of the pond, and drank like a dog. Ah, ah, how well I remember it all!"

"No doubt it is unhealthy now," said Telemaco Bini. "But drainage will soon set that to rights."

"Why, the unhealthiness is one of the great points in our case!" roared Peretti. "The honest peasant dies there of his labour. His daily bread is steeped in poison—eh? That's the way to put it. Drain the marshes, and you save the honest peasant—rescue him from the feudal tyranny of his noble proprietors, and all that! Eh?"

"And who are his noble proprietors?" asked Nina again. "Because, if you come to a question of expropriations, that will be all important."

"Some of the land we have in view belongs to the State—that is to say, it was ecclesiastical property, and has been incorporated. So far that would be pretty plain sailing," said Bini.

"Ay; but a large tract here," said Giorgi, drawing a snuffy forefinger across nearly half the space enclosed within the red line. "This tract stretching away to the south-east doesn't belong to the State."

"To whom then?" asked Nina, advancing for the first time to the table, and looking over Giorgi's shoulder.

The old man enjoyed the general suspense for a moment. It was so rare a thing for him to be attended to. "That great tract," said he, at length, very slowly, "belongs to the most noble and illustrious Signor His Excellency the Duke of Pontalto."

"Ciccio Nasoni!"

"Count of Pantanello, Baron of Rocca Sterile, Knight of the Pontifical Order of St. Boniface, &c., &c., &c."

"Ciccio Nasoni!" repeated Nina. "And you didn't know this, Peretti?"

"I don't know it now," rejoined Peretti, brutally. "My information was that there were practically only two parties to be reckoned with—the State and the San Gemignanos. Where the Duke of Pontalto comes in perhaps Giorgi can tell us."

"But don't you remember," said Nina, clasping her hands, "that Ciccio's mother was a San Gemignano, and that he is his mother's heir?"

"Devil take the San Gemignanos, root and branch!" cried Peretti, irritated by Giorgi's silent smile of triumph.

"Well, well," put in Beppe Guarini, "the whole thing is yet in an elementary state. Nothing explicit has been said about it outside ourselves." And he made a circular movement with his hands to include all those present.

"Of course," answered Peretti. "That's just what I tried to say. There has not been time to get up the details. But the ladies are so impatient. They think everything can be done in a flash!"

The Signora Nina took this with perfect good humour, and made no retort. She was strong enough to allow Peretti the satisfaction of the last word. It was a curious spectacle to behold this giant, massive of frame, brassy of voice, and impudent of temper, quivering at the slightest hurt to his self-conceit. Most of his acquaintances were unaware of this kind of sensitiveness in him. He said rough things, and heard rough things, and overbore opposition with an assumption of noisy *bonhomie*, and felt himself equal to most situations. But he had a suspicion that Nina Guarini saw through him under all circumstances, and he had a well-founded objection to be seen through. Moreover, he was persuaded that Nina Guarini had no admiration for his abilities, and but a poor opinion of his jokes. This persuasion embittered him most of all; for a total absence of self-respect is compatible with boundless vanity. In reality he was a good deal thrown out by the discovery that Ciccio Nasoni owned some of the coveted land. It would necessitate some fresh combinations, and setting to work in a new way.

"The thing to do," observed Jules Bonnet, "would be to run a railway right through the district." Bini shook his head. A railway would only raise the price of land. There was not the least necessity, nor even use, for a railway in those parts at present.

"No," assented Beppe, "not at present. Nevertheless, Bonnet is very right. If the company were in possession of land through which it was proposed to run a railway, the value of the shares would rise immediately. Of course the company must be in possession *first*."

"Of course," said Jules Bonnet. Bini nodded.

"Ta, ta, ta!" exclaimed Peretti, clicking his thumb

and fore-finger against one another. "Let the company once be in possession of the land, and things will go smooth enough, I'll answer for it. We must get at the Ministry somehow. Beppe, you might do something to help us poor devils. We can't all have the luck"—he was about to add "of owning two influential newspapers of different colours," but he thought it prudent to suppress the sneer and change his sentence —"we can't all be in a position to forward the good cause."

"I have told you that you won't get a stiver of subsidy," said Beppe.

Silvotti whispered behind his hand to old Giorgi: "Do you see? He has ascertained that; so the thing has been talked over already!"

"Well, let the subsidy alone for the present," rejoined Peretti. "Are they willing to push the thing, and give us the concession for making the roads? And, if they're not willing, are we strong enough to make 'em? What pressure can we bring to bear on them? Those are the points, straight and plain. I never beat about the bush. I speak out. I'm not afraid of saying what I mean." And so on, with a blare of self-trumpeting, but with one eye on Guarini.

Beppe was of opinion that the Ministry, even with the best will in the world, could not openly venture to patronize the scheme. It was, of course, an immaculate scheme. It originated in lofty and patriotic motives. It was calculated to do good to the peasant class—those "hungry brothers," of whom Bini spoke so affectionately in the Chamber, but for whose comfort he had hitherto been able to propose only the Barmecide feast of giving them all votes without stint or measure. It was a noble scheme. But such was the incurable ignobility of the Right that the purity of the Ministers' motives would be suspected. That, to be sure, would be of less consequence if the compactness of the Left could be depended on. But, unfortunately, even among the Left, there were jealousies, and divisions,

and suspicions. Several men who had no chance of getting into the company would take that opportunity of denouncing Ministers for supporting it.

It was two o'clock in the morning before the council broke up. They did not appear to have settled very definitely what to do. But Beppe Guarini had arrived at a clear determination what *not* to do. He would not advance money for the furtherance of the scheme in its present phase. This determination, however, he did not think it necessary to announce. Giorgi was in unusually good spirits. For once he saw a prospect of some hopefulness for himself. As he limped downstairs side by side with Carlo Silvotti, whose pace was retarded by the operation of trying to light a restive cigar, the old man said, confidentially: "Well, if they do get up this company, they'll give me some post or other. As to shares, I have no money to invest. Of course, a patriot who has been in exile——"

"Confound——" broke in Carlo.

"What?"

"This cigar. Confound this Government cigar! It won't draw. I wonder what the *Regia* really do make their cigars of! It's a fearful speculation, and opens appalling vistas which no man has yet fathomed."

"As I was saying, if the company is established——"

Puff from Carlo. "Yes."

"They'll give me a secretaryship at least, I should think, eh?"

"Very"—puff—"likely."

CHAPTER VI.

When Beppe Guarini inquired of his wife with some curiosity why she invited that little English girl and her aunt, Nina replied, "Because I like Violet." And it was true. Nina Guarini professed a great inde-

pendence of the world's judgment. And she cared very little at the bottom of her heart whether the old Princess Nasoni anathematized her, or the Marchesa del Ciuffo pronounced her, with a shrug, to be "not of our *monde*, you know." Several circumstances which were quite within the range of possibility might arise to induce either of those noble ladies to receive her. In fact, La Nina might long ago have made her appearance in the Palazzo Nasoni had it so pleased her. Don Silvestro Tramezzani, editor of the "*Rome of the Romans*," was at one time in intimate business relations with Guarini. And Don Silvestro had but to tell the Princess Nasoni that such and such a person was actively serving the cause of the Church either with money or brains, to ensure that person's being treated with civility by the whole of the "Black" circle over which the old Princess held undisputed sway. But La Nina did not wish to go to the Palazzo Nasoni. It would be ineffably dull, and would compromise her with her own friends. "It may sometimes be necessary," said Nina, "to pay the price of being bored to the verge of melancholy madness, in order to obtain certain things. When it is necessary, I brave boredom. But we can get whatever we want from the Princess's set at a cheaper rate; and why go beyond the market value?" As to the Del Ciuffo, Nina's feeling for her was one of perfectly good-humoured contempt. A woman who could paint herself with such blundering unskilfulness need not be taken seriously.

But Nina, although she could set her face as a flint against the brassiness of such a woman as the Del Ciuffo, would have been hurt to know the contents of stupid Mrs. Lucas's letter to Miss Baines. It may be taken as a rule that no woman desires the genuine respect of good women who does not in some degree deserve it. Nina knew much and divined more of what was said about her in the *salons* of Roman society.

She understood the people who mainly composed it, and despised most of them without rancour. But she

would not have been indifferent to the ill opinion of simple, inexperienced Violet Moore. From the beginning of their chance acquaintance in a Swiss hotel she had been attracted by the girl's unfeigned sweetness and candour. Worldly-wise people would have shaken their heads in pity over Violet's ignorant infatuation with the charming Madame Guarini, and yet Violet's innocence had a truer insight than their suspicion. The worldly-wise people might have been right in deprecating such a friendship for the English girl; but they would have been right on wrong grounds. Far from encouraging any disregard of the *convenances*, Nina constantly impressed on her young friend the necessity of observing them. Violet must not go out alone—must not receive visitors in her aunt's absence—must not do this or that.

When Violet became more intimate with her, and heard something of the social philosophy that was preached in Casa Guarini, she used to protest a little against these police regulations. "Dear Signora Nina," she would say, "why do you tell me not to do such innocent things? I have heard you speak against all this suspicious system, and say how much better society is in countries where women are more trusted."

But Nina shook her head. "All these theories you speak of are well and good," said she, "and I hold by them. But they must be inaugurated by a different sort of person from my little Violetta. You are not cut out for a pioneer of female emancipation."

Sometimes, however, Violetta's stubborn *Britishness* rebelled outright. "I am an English girl, and I will behave like an English girl," she declared. "It would be absurd to shut myself up in prison because foreign girls are not allowed to walk out alone. And if people here think it improper, I don't care! If one does right, isn't that enough?"

"Enough for what? Not enough to save you from martyrdom," Nina would answer. Nina's consciousness of how she herself was spoken of in sundry Roman

circles made her far more anxious that Violet should be safely hedged in by the proprieties than another woman might have been. The experiences of her life, which contained many pages blurred with tears and scorched with fire, had not persuaded her to disbelieve in goodness when she saw it. But it had made her profoundly sceptical as to other people's belief in goodness.

In spite of their intimacy with the Guarinis, Miss Baines and her niece did not penetrate into any other Italian society. One reason for this was that very few women frequented the Guarini *salon*. This circumstance had troubled Miss Baines a good deal at first. Captain Masi, to whom she once hinted her surprise at it, and her wish to see some of the Duke of Pontalto's female relatives, answered that the noble ladies of the House of Nasoni were for the most part horrid old frights, and thought he had given a conclusive reason against wishing to make their acquaintance.

"But none of those gentlemen at Madame Guarini's bring their wives with them," said Miss Baines. "It seems so odd to our notions."

"Well," answered Masi laughing, "that can't be a great deprivation to you and Miss Violet. I never heard that ladies were so fond of each other's society."

Whereupon Miss Baines took refuge in her knitting, hopeless of making him comprehend her state of mind on the subject of Madame Guarini's *salon*.

Indeed, none of her male Italian acquaintances sympathized with her perplexities on this score; and she had one or two male Italian acquaintances besides Mario Masi. Old Giorgi became a constant visitor at Miss Baines's lodgings. He came ostensibly to give Italian lessons to Violet, but he stayed to harangue Miss Baines in his fluent foreign English. The two struck up an odd kind of friendship, which was not seriously hindered by their minds being as far as the poles asunder upon almost every conceivable question. Miss Baines had gradually got over her fear of his fierce eyebrows and violent modes of expression.

Giorgi had one merit in the eyes of a shy person: he required nothing from a companion but the power of enduring his eloquence without going to sleep. Then he was serviceable in a variety of small ways. Nothing delighted him more than to be entrusted with some little commission. He would haggle and bargain for an hour, expending five francs' worth of time to save twopence; and would appear triumphant at Miss Baines's tea-table with a brown paper parcel and the detailed narrative of the exploit. Above all, his familiar knowledge of her language was delightful to Betsy Baines. His long residence in England had made it possible for her to speak to him as carelessly as she would speak to a countryman of her own, with the certainty of being understood. And this was no light advantage; for she had learned by experience that her idiomatic unstudied utterances were liable to amazing misapprehension on the part of foreigners who fancied they knew English.

To Giorgi Miss Baines had expressed her perplexity as to the reason why ladies absented themselves from the Guarinis' house. But she had gained no elucidation from him—chiefly because he used her inquiries as a text against the prejudiced, pig-headed prudery of the English. Giorgi had gathered a bundle of impressions and opinions as to what English people were likely to say and do and think under sundry given circumstances. And these he used to make dogmatic generalizations, wholly regardless of the fluctuation of individual facts. Another guest, who occasionally appeared at Miss Baines's modest tea-table, was Telemaco Bini. But with him it was impossible for her to communicate save in dumb show. Indeed, he did not talk much to any one; but would sit for an hour at the time eating biscuits, drinking weak tea, and furtively gazing at Violet with so gloomy an expression of countenance that Miss Baines was made quite nervous by it. Beyond this oddly-assorted group, and the people whom they met at the Guarinis, Miss Baines

and her niece knew no Italians at all. The rest of their acquaintances in Rome were country people of their own: one or two residents who returned every winter, and a sprinkling of tourists of the class who frequent foreign boarding-houses. They met with no one so full of information about the private history of the Guarinis as Mrs. Lucas's anonymous friends. Most of the English with whom they came in contact had never heard of Beppe, nor of the Signora Nina. The aunt and niece kept that part of their Roman experiences quite apart and separate from their English tea-drinkings and parties to visit the sights of Rome. At first Miss Baines had been a little apt to boast in a quiet way about the persons of quality whom she met at the Guarinis. She had been fluttered and flattered by the receipt of two of Ciccio Nasoni's visiting cards, which she left for some time in a conspicuous position on the chimney-piece; and had discovered with an inward elation of the spirit that the fat Deputy with the small feet, who always called her Meess, was a Marquis. But when Violet explained to her that the Duke of Pontalto had merely sent his cards by a servant, as an act of courtesy considered imperative according to Italian customs, and that the fat Deputy, Marquis though he were, was a person of no social consequence, and not half so influential in any way as Gino Peretti, the oil-merchant, Miss Baines was to a great degree silenced. But all the same, she cherished the joy of having received a Duke's visiting card and shaken hands with a Marquis, as a possession of which time itself could not wholly rob her. And in her letters home she compensated herself to some extent for her enforced reticence in Rome.

Miss Baines had not many correspondents. Mrs. Lucas, although a mere travelling acquaintance, continued to write to her occasionally in the course of her journey by easy stages back to England. Mrs. Lucas appeared to have forgotten all about the Guarinis, and expended her "choice language" on subjects more

immediately interesting to herself. But the one person to whom Miss Baines wrote with unfailing punctuality was Uncle Joshua. Uncle Joshua seldom replied to her letters, but he would have resented any neglect in writing to him. Violet was remiss on this point. She had no special affection for her Uncle Joshua, and declared that she never knew what to say to him. But Betsy Baines wrote to him regularly. She was tremblingly alive to the importance of keeping up Uncle Joshua's interest in Violet. Mr. Higgins, who was a childless widower, had expressed his intention of leaving the bulk of his money to his great-niece, Violet Moore, subject, however, to the vague condition "if she behaves herself to please me." The old man had been fond of his niece, Violet's mother, and had petted Violet herself when she was a golden-haired, chubby toddler. But as the latter grew older the relations between her grand-uncle and herself had not been altogether so satisfactory. Violet developed a reprehensible habit of differing from Uncle Joshua's expressed opinion on more than one subject. Especially she differed from him in her estimate of her Aunt Betsy. Mr. Higgins was tyrannical with Betsy, and domineered over her, having but a low opinion of her intelligence. Violet, on the contrary, he pronounced to be "a sharp little monkey" and "a cute little minx," and the old man would chuckle at her saucy speeches, and encourage her with pennies to "take a rise out of Aunt Betsy."

Quite involuntarily, however, Mr. Higgins was the means of more strongly attaching Violet to her aunt. As she grew beyond babyhood she perceived, with a child's quick sense of injustice, that gentle Aunt Betsy was unfairly judged and unkindly treated, and, with a child's rash impatience of compromise, would have had her resent and resist Uncle Joshua's unsympathetic sayings and doings. Many a struggle had Betsy Baines to prevent the girl from openly defying the old man, and many a scheme had she devised to keep secret

from Violet some instance of his tyranny or coarse feeling towards herself. Mr. Higgins was reputed by many of his acquaintances to be a very generous, kind-hearted man. And, in fact, he was not avaricious. But he coveted power, and influence, and supremacy in his narrow circle. Little ambitions whose sphere is circumscribed by the parish boundaries are quite as absorbing as big ones whose limits are commensurate with the surface of the globe. With all her humility and desire to conciliate him for Violet's sake, Miss Baines had no gift of flattery. She had never been able to win upon her uncle by any conscious efforts of her own. One source of irritation to him—totally unguessed by his niece—was her possession of a small independent income. The one circumstance which, more than any other, had softened him towards her of late years was her feeble health. Not that he was particularly susceptible of pity from that cause, but it was agreeable to him to contrast his niece's weakness with his own strength. "Look at me," he would say; "old enough to be Betsy's father, and never ill in bed for one day for forty year! Ah, this generation's but a poor lot! I don't know what they're made of!" And on the receipt of each letter from Italy he went about telling his friends that that goose, Betsy Baines, had got small good from travelling all the way to Rome in search of health. "Not an ounce of stamina! No constitution! I could have told her that Italy wouldn't make her strong. Climate's all gammon! Nobody talked about change of air when I was young. If you can't be well in Dozebury, you can't be well anywhere!" And the people who had no prospect of living elsewhere than in Dozebury said that was very true.

The life in Dozebury, although it was but a year since she had left it, seemed strangely far away to Violet. Sometimes, on the receipt of one of her Uncle Joshua's rare letters, a chance word, an allusion to some familiar person or circumstance, startled her by recalling things so utterly apart from her present associations.

She felt as if she had in a sense outgrown Dozebury during the last year. It would all seem very small and poor and dull after Rome!

But one day, as she sat alone at needlework, she began to think of Switzerland; recalling the Lake of Geneva, and her first glimpse of the great snow mountains, and all her enthusiasms. And, with a sinking of the heart, she was suddenly aware that not only Dozebury but the Lake and the Alps would seem dull and empty and shorn of their glory if she were to return to them to-morrow. The hot blood rushed over her cheeks and brow, and then receding left her pale. She leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes in a strange languor that was like a waking dream. For weeks past an articulate sentiment had been in her heart—a consciousness that the great spell had been cast over her, and that the world would be no more to her as it had been before she saw Mario Masi, for ever and for ever. But an inarticulate sentiment is like a spirit impalpable. Now that thought had clothed her feeling with words, it took shape and form, and was a ghost no longer, but a living, breathing reality that must be reckoned with. As she leaned back with closed eyes, little tremors ran through her frame—she could scarcely tell whether of pleasure or pain. At some moments a wave of emotion rushed over her and drowned thought. Then came the cold fit of fear. How could it ever be? Did he think of her? Did he care for her? She was foolish and self-deluding! It could never be. Her thoughts did not busy themselves to consider what would be their chances of happiness even if Mario loved her with all his heart's devotion. That in itself would be enough for happiness. She looked no further. Few persons who saw them together could have doubted what Masi's feeling was towards the girl. But all her life was set upon the hazard, and she did not dare to believe. What was she, that this ineffable good should befall her? How could she hope for such unexampled happiness? The old, old story is

new to each of us in turn. The great emotions do not lose their power of surprising and transporting because they have been said and sung of for a thousand years. Sunrise is a spectacle which never grows old, though we do.

Violet was aroused from the languorous trance which held her body motionless as with a charm, and filled her soul with vague images flowing on like the ever-changing, still succeeding ripples of a stream. Her aunt had entered the room, and was looking at her.

"Violet! Violet, are you asleep? I have just had a letter from Uncle Joshua. He says we are to go home."

CHAPTER VII.

For his part, Mario Masi had yielded to the pleasantness of falling in love with the fair English girl, as he yielded to all pleasant impulses, without a thought of resistance. Violet was pretty, and fresh, and gentle. She had sufficient culture and intelligence to make it worth while to talk with her seriously when one felt inclined, and to ensure her appreciation of one's best moods; and she had no pretensions to set up as a clever woman, one of those *donne superiori* of whom Masi had a horror. Perhaps he a little under-rated Violet's native sense. But her ignorance of the world was undeniable. And she had, moreover, a delightful love of laughter, which Masi had supposed to be rare among Englishwomen.

Altogether he had found the path which led him into love with Violet Moore most seductively easy and agreeable. Evening after evening, day after day, he haunted Miss Baines's lodging, and passed hours in Violet's society. It was so pleasant to be with her! It was so sweet to see her innocent face smile and

glow at his coming—to hear the low, sweet voice, which had a tone in it for him it had for no one else—to enjoy the thousand little unspoken confidences which grew up between them, and set them apart in each other's mind from the rest of the world! It was so delicious to receive the unconscious flattery of Violet's growing reliance on him, and belief in him, and worship of him!

Masi had always declared that he should never marry. He had some small means of his own. He had inherited from his father a tiny estate and a small capital fairly well invested. The whole of his private income was less than that of many an English clerk, but together with his pay it made him almost rich, so long as he was alone in the world, and had to think of no one but himself. True, he had neither carriage nor horses. He smoked the Government tobacco, and drank the wine of the country. But he never needed to deny himself the luxury of a street cab, if he wished to use one; he always had a cigar to give to a friend, and could afford to dine at a restaurant where the table-linen was spotless. But with a wife all that would be changed. As to marrying a girl without a penny, the paternal regulations of the Italian army had taken care to provide against that folly so long as he remained in the service. It would be impossible for him to obtain leave to marry, unless he could prove that he and his wife between them were possessed of a certain income apart from his pay. Nina Guarini, who liked him, and had formerly received a good deal of his confidence, used to advise him to look out for a wife with money. But that road to fortune did not allure him. He professed to dislike and despise the man who could marry a woman for her money.

"Well," retorted Nina, "but you may fall in love with a rich girl, or at least a girl with a decent *dot!* Why shouldn't a girl with a *dot* be loved? There's no reason in human nature against it."

"None at all. Only I shan't happen to fall in love

with a girl with a *dot*. It isn't my destiny. You'll see; and the best way is to put the whole question of marrying out of my head once for all."

But now the question of marrying presented itself in a startlingly importunate manner. He had absolutely no knowledge of Violet's worldly position, but he had received the impression that she was chiefly dependent on her aunt. And in any case it was clear that they were not rich. "We could not go and live at Boscombroso on what I have," said Mario to himself. "It would be too terrible. I know I should put a revolver to my head before six months were over!" It did not occur to him to consider what Violet would do if she consented to accompany him to Boscombroso. He certainly never contemplated her having recourse to the revolver. It would be a dreary, dull life for her, no doubt. But his imagination was far more lively in picturing what the life would be for himself. It would never do. "I'll give up the whole thing, and go away," declared Masi. "I'll ask to-morrow for a long leave to go down to Boscombroso for family affairs." And then, having made that Spartan resolution for the fifth or sixth time, with particular energy on one particular day, he thought he might reward himself for his self-control by spending the evening with Violet. It would be the last! He should, probably, never see her again! But that thought was so painful that he instantly put it aside. Why think of painful things? Mario Masi never did. It was his creed not to do so; and it would have been an excellent rule of conduct if troubles could be abolished by not thinking about them, or if life were a story-book, whose pages we could turn at our pleasure, and skip the ugly chapters.

He went up to the third storey, where Miss Baines lodged, and was admitted by the broad-backed Mariuccia, who grinned upon him as a familiar acquaintance. *La vecchia* (the old woman), as Mariuccia always designated Miss Baines, with Homeric simplicity

and constancy of epithet, was at home, but the Signorina Violetta was out. Masi, when he heard this, hesitated for an instant on the threshold. Violet was probably at some house which he also frequented, and where he might find her. Her aunt could tell him. Should he enter? Or would it not be better to go away, and leave the unfinished chapter of his love romance, then and there, for ever? It was as if Fate held two folded lots in her hand, and bade him choose.

As he stood uncertain, Mariuccia flung open the door of the sitting-room, and announced, in her rough, hoarse voice: "*C'è il Capitano!*"

Fate works out her dramas with sovereign indifference to the scenic proprieties or the precedence of the actors, and puts messages of great moment into the mouths of clowns and waiting-maids. Mariuccia decided Masi's choice, and he went in.

Miss Baines was alone in the shabby sitting-room, seated close to the fire, with a shawl round her shoulders and the inevitable tea-tray on a table by her side. She received Masi with her usual timid kindness of manner. Would he not sit down? She was so sorry that Violet was out. She had gone with a party of friends to see the Coliseum by moonlight. Miss Baines herself had a little cold, and had been afraid to venture, but she had persuaded Violet to go because she thought a little society would cheer her. She had been out of spirits and very low all day, and, therefore——

Masi here interrupted her to express a hope that no trouble or misfortune had befallen Miss Violet.

"Oh! no. Well, I hardly know. No; really one can't call it exactly a misfortune. But she is so attached to Rome—far more than I am, to say the truth. You won't mind my saying that I do like my own country best? I have been used to it so long, you see. Violet, of course, is younger, and the idea of going away quite upsets her."

"Going away! You are not going away?"

"Yes, we are. I had a letter from my uncle to-day, who is an old man, and the head of our family, and he wishes us to return to England. I think we shall be off within a fortnight—in fact, as soon as we can get things settled about the lodgings, and all that. Signor Giorgi thinks we might underlet them for the remainder of our lease. Do you think we might, Captain Masi?"

Masi stood looking at her fixedly, and hearing no word she said. When she paused, he repeated: "Going away! But why must you mind this uncle? Why go if she likes to stay?"

"People cannot do as they like always, you know. One has duties. And Violet ought not to displease her grand-uncle. He has strict principles, and is greatly respected where he lives, at Dozebury, and he can leave his property how he pleases. Young persons do not think of these things. Perhaps one likes them all the better for not thinking of them. But it is my duty not to let Violet act contrary to her grand-uncle. You are not going, Captain Masi? Won't you have a cup of tea?"

But Masi declared that he would not intrude on her another instant. She was ill, and needed quiet. Besides, he had an engagement. He had only just called in to see—— How long might it be since the party started for the Coliseum? Being told that Violet had not left the house a quarter of an hour when he came in, he stammered a word of farewell, wrung Miss Baines's hand, and was half-way down the stairs before Mariuccia's bovine paces had brought her to the door to let him out.

It was a brilliant winter night. The deep transparent sky was sprinkled with a diamond dust of stars. Along the Corso the shops were shut, but here and there the *cafés* made bright patches on the pavement, and the rows of street-lamps blinked orange-coloured under the moonlight. The irregular house-fronts were

arabesqued with shadows thrown by their endless variety of balconies. Where the moonlight fell it blanched the grey stone and tinted stucco of palaces and dwellings, and glittered on the gilded letters of a signboard, and showed the brown or green lattice blinds in the ghosts of their daylight colours. After sunset a little keen wind, which had been blowing the sharp white dust about all day, had entirely dropped, and the air was full of a still sweetness that caressed your cheek like the touch of a soft cold hand. Near the centre of the great Roman artery, the Corso, close to the Piazza Colonna, there was still plenty of stir and movement. Behind the great plate-glass windows of the restaurants, where the gas flared coarsely in an atmosphere heavy with the smell of food; in the crimson velvet-cushioned *cafés*, and even on the bleached pavement outside them, there were scores of loungers, standing or strolling as if it had been May rather than December. Carriages passed and crossed and disappeared into the labyrinth of side streets, their lamps gleaming like gigantic topazes from Aladdin's garden, and the horses' hoofs beating out a sharp rhythmic tattoo above the low drone of the rolling wheels. Suddenly from a side alley a crowd of shabby men and boys swooped out with a rush into the Corso, and scattered themselves to all points of the compass; shouting at the pitch of their lungs the evening newspapers just published, and making the air quiver with their hoarse, shrill, or bawling cries. As these died away by degrees in the distance, the ear took up again the previous sounds, as it takes up an interrupted tune—the rumbling wheels, the trotting hoofs, the shuffle of feet on the pavement, and the talk and laughter of passers-by, heard through the clear night, distinct, yet softened, like voices on the water.

Mario Masi marched on through it all with his regular soldier's step, looking neither to the right nor the left. His mind and heart were full of one thought: Violet Moore was going away!—one feeling: how hard

it would be for him to lose her! He passed along the length of the Corso to the Piazza di Venezia, where the huge walls of Paul the Second's mediæval palace made an inky lake of shadow on the ground, and reared their square battlements sharply against the pellucid tenderness of the sky. Thence turning into a maze of dark streets, he emerged at length behind the Forum, and the Coliseum was before him.

All the space around it was flooded by the light of a moon nearly at the full, which now floated high in the heavens, distinct and clearly rounded like a globe of pure pale gold amidst the intense blue. The vast oval of the Coliseum showed its majestic curves beneath this radiance with unspeakable harmonies of light and shade. A few carriages were waiting at the archway by which the great Amphitheatre is now entered. Inside it several groups of strangers were wandering among the shadowy corridors, climbing, sitting, talking, laughing, gazing, or meditating. But the huge ruin absorbed them. They could not subdue, they could scarcely disturb, the silent Spirit of the Moonlight. Mario stood still for a moment when he found himself within the portal of the Coliseum, and looked from its cavernous shadow on to the expanse of the interior intersected by deep fosses—a silver flooring barred with ebony. Under the moon's effulgence the bare walls had an arid golden tint like the arid golden desert sands. No twig, no leaf, no blade of grass was there to suggest growth and change. The gigantic fabric, with its rows of open arches framing curved spaces of blue-black sky, stood utterly desolate as if stricken with eternal barrenness, but sublime in the dignity of its stern despair—an invincible stoic Roman, defying Time and Fate.

A voice came down spirit-like from the mountainous height of the topmost gallery. It was one of those sweet, flute-toned voices of the North, which seem to have something passionlessly angelic; so different from Italian voices, which are often like their wines,—full of

sunshine, but with a rough taste of the grape skin to remind us of mother earth. The voice called down in clear tones, cleaving the silence like a silver arrow, "Violet, Violet! Come up here to us. It is so lovely!" Then Violet's voice answered from below, fainter and more veiled, "No; I am tired. I will stay here. I will wait."

Guided by the sound, Mario strained his eyes in the direction from whence she had spoken, and saw her sitting alone—a shadow within a shadow—on a fallen block of marble. As he passed from beneath the archway to where she sat, he crossed a moonlit space, and the rays of light sparkled for an instant on his sword and the silver star on his uniform, and attracted her eye. In a moment he was beside her. But that moment had sufficed for her to recognize him in the moonlight, and she neither started nor exclaimed. Neither did she start when he said, "Violet, is it you? What a happy chance!" It seemed quite natural that he should be there, and that he should call her by her name in that passionate, low voice. She felt no wonder then. It was only afterwards that she began to wonder why she had not wondered.

He sat down on the great ruined block of marble close beside her, and for a second or two neither of them spoke. "You did not expect to see me," he said at length.

"Oh no. What brought you here?"

"It must have been my good angel. Until I found myself here I did not know that I was coming. I had no plan in my mind."

"Is it not lovely?" said Violet. "I did not much want to come. But the Sweetmans urged me, and my aunt urged me. And then I thought that perhaps it would be my last look at the Coliseum, and I would bid it 'good-bye' by the moonlight. I would not climb up there with the others. I liked better to sit here all by myself, not saying 'good-bye,' but feeling it. But I forgot. You don't know——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Masi. "Are you sorry to go?"

There was no answer. The climbing moon began to illuminate the shadowy corner where they sat. Its rays fell on Violet's head, and she turned away her face.

"Violet, answer me. Are you sorry to go away?"

She made a supreme effort, and answered in a strained voice, utterly unlike her own, "Of course. Every one is sorry to leave Rome."

"But you don't look at me. Won't you look at me? Violet! When I pray you——"

He took her hand in his right hand, and put his left gently and lightly round her shoulders and turned her towards him. The moonlight fell on a sweet face white as a white rose. Her broadleaved hat had fallen back, revealing a space of rippling hair, and the candid brow creased like the forehead of a sobbing child. She had cried hours ago, and her eyes were still heavy and swollen. As Mario looked at her, some big tears gathered and rolled glittering down her cheeks, and her lips quivered piteously as she tried in vain to steady them. The cloak she wore had a dark fur collar, which admirably framed the firm white contour of her throat; and one or two bright tears fell on to the soft fur and shone there, gleaming like diamonds on the sable. The arm which lightly encircled her shoulder suddenly tightened its hold, and Mario drew her to him.

"Stay with me, Violet," he whispered. "I love you. Stay with me, and be my wife!"

For an instant she yielded to his embrace. Then, gently withdrawing herself from his arms, she hid her face in both hands with a burst of tears.

"Violet—*Violetta mia!* You are not angry? You are not sorry?"

"No; only happy,—too happy. Let me cry. How foolish to cry because I am happy!"

"You know I love you? You have known it long?"

"I thought a little while ago I did not know it.

But now I know that I knew it. Only I was so afraid to believe! I dared not believe."

"Why?"

She lifted her face blurred and swollen with tears, but strangely sweet in its wistful innocence. "Because I loved you," she answered simply.

With a sudden impulse of his Southern blood he flung himself on his knees before her, seized her ungloved hand, soft and warm from the shelter of the fur cloak, and covered it with passionate kisses. "*Amor mio, amor mio,*" he murmured, "I am not worthy of you."

Violet hushed him as though he had uttered a blasphemy. Not worthy of her! "Pray, pray don't speak so!" she cried. "It frightens me. It makes me see how different you think me from what I really am." Then she made him rise from his worshipping posture at her feet. "Some one may come upon us at any moment, you know. My friends will be here again directly."

He stood up, and drew her arm within his. "Let us walk about, then," he said. "They will find us soon enough; too soon, *Violetta mia!* Say it once more, 'I love you.'" She obeyed.

"Now say it in my language. It must be your language, too, now. You must be an Italian. Say '*Mario mio, ti voglio bene.*'"

"*Ti voglio bene,*" echoed Violet, with her stiff measured foreign accent. Then, nestling closer to his side, she whispered, "No; I spoil it. It is music when you say it. But if I could make it sound as sweetly in your ears as it sounds in my heart, you would not be discontented."

They paced up and down in the deep shadow, scarcely speaking. Masi was intoxicated with a feeling of passionate tenderness, in which a strange sense of pathos lurked, like a minor interval recurring in a joyous tune. At moments this innocent creature who had given him her heart moved in him an impulse of

yearning pity, such as we who are world-worn often feel for a little happy child. "*Poverella!*" he said, softly

"*Poverella!*" she repeated. "That means poor little thing! But I am not poor now. I am rich—the richest girl in Rome."

The word "rich" smote him with something like self-reproach. He paused at a place where the moonlight fell through an archway and looked at her smiling, tearful face. "*Poverella!*" he repeated; and drew her with a protecting gesture closer to his side. But he was not going to mingle any bitter reflections with the sweet draught at his lips. There was always time enough to think troublesome thoughts. As for Violet, her trust in him was absolute. She did not question the future. Mario loved her. That was a fact which must of itself make life happy, as sunrise makes the day.

Violet's friends began to descend, and called to her to join them. "Violet!" cried the sweet fluty voice. "Where are you? Are you cold?" The voice belonged to Miss Sweetman, a bony, girlish person of five-and-thirty, with clumsy boots and a huge fashionable poke bonnet, casting a grotesque shadow on the silver-grey ground. Her mother, Mrs. Sweetman, was with her, and a couple of travelling Englishmen caught on the wing. Every one expressed regret that Miss Moore had not climbed up with them. It had been so splendid! The effect of the building seen by moonlight from above was absolutely indescribable! And then they all began to describe it.

They found Violet sitting alone on the block of marble where they had left her. But when they went outside whom should they find near the entrance but Captain Masi! There was a general exclamation and handshaking on the part of the Sweetmans. "Why, how did you chance to be here at this hour?" asked Mrs. Sweetman.

"I have been on duty," answered Masi, with perfect coolness and *à plomb*.

"On duty! Where?"

"At my barracks. Don't you know that there are barracks not far off, near the Bocca della Verità?"

"Fancy being kept there till this hour! What a shame!" exclaimed Miss Sweetman, who was rather too importunately juvenile in her demeanour towards the male sex. "Weren't you awfully bored?"

"Of course. So I thought I would amuse myself by a look at the Coliseum."

"Well! Whatever we may think of the Coliseum by moonlight, I should never have called it amusing! What an expression to use! But you haven't a bit of sentiment, you Italians; you are horribly practical and prosaic. I assure you they are, Mr. Jones, though English people will never believe it till they have lived in Italy"

Mr. Jones, an undergraduate, said, "Oh, really! Ha, ha!" and contemplated Captain Masi with that politely mistrustful demeanour not uncommon amongst the young men of our country towards a stranger;—a demeanour the like of which may be sometimes observed in a dog, who greets new four-footed acquaintances with a condescending wag, tempered by a warning growl.

"Come, come," cried Mrs. Sweetman, "*I* am prosaic and practical enough to object to loitering about here in the cold. Get into the carriage, girls. Mr. Jones and Mr. Billing, we will give you a lift home if you like. One of you can sit on the box."

Masi, who had been speaking in a low voice to Violet, now declared boldly that Miss Moore wished to walk home. "Walk home!" exclaimed Mrs. Sweetman. "Oh, it's absurd at this hour."

"I should like to walk, too, mamma! I should love it of all things," said Miss Sweetman, who perceived that if they drove, Jones, as the younger man, would be consigned to the box seat out of reach. Mrs. Sweetman hesitated. She seldom opposed her daughter's will, and never opposed it successfully. "I promised Miss Baines to see Violet safe home," she said.

"Oh, I'll chaperon — we'll chaperon each other," declared Miss Sweetman, playfully. "Silly children!" returned Mrs. Sweetman, shaking her finger at Violet, who stood very silent in the shadow of the poke bonnet. "Well,—if these gentlemen will undertake to escort you——!"

Captain Masi gallantly volunteered for the duty. And Mr. Jones was obliging enough to say that he didn't mind having a look at the Roman streets by moonlight, being of opinion that it would be "rather fun"—which phrase he uttered with a weighty gravity beyond his years. "Oh! it will be exquisite!" cried Miss Sweetman, clapping her hands. "We'll go through the Forum, and over the Capitol Hill. It will be too lovely!" Mr. Billing, an elderly clergyman, declined to join the walking party, and ensconced himself beneath the carriage rug beside Mrs. Sweetman.

The four pedestrians stood for a moment looking after the carriage as it rolled away, and then Masi unceremoniously placed Violet's arm beneath his own. Miss Sweetman might not have approved this arrangement under other circumstances, but on this occasion it suited her, and she was in high good humour. She took Mr. Jones in tow with decision, and led the way.

"How could you tell such a story?" whispered Violet, as she and Mario stood arm and arm before moving off in Miss Sweetman's wake.

"What story? Oh! about being on duty at the barracks? Well, of course. I was not going to tell that inquisitive old lady the truth!"

"But you need not have made up such a story! I was astonished to hear you so coolly invent——"

Mario laughed. "*Andiamo!*" said he. "Don't be a little Puritan. If it had not been for me you would have been at this moment in the carriage with Mrs. Sweetman and the Reverend Billing. Perhaps I did wrong to say you wished to walk home?"

"No. At least it was quite true, though I had not said it. Do stay one second! Let me look once more!

Let me get the image of it all into my mind, so that I may never forget it. Do you know I used to have a strange feeling about the Coliseum? I always felt depressed when I went to see it. It looked so desolate and stern. And I thought of all the horrible things that have been done there, and the thousands of human beings who used to crowd it, so full of life and strength!—all dead and passed away! And I had a feeling as if it were a fatal place, with a chilly atmosphere of misfortune about it. But now that is all changed. From to-night I shall love every stone of it. The one great good thing of my life has come to me there."

As she stood looking back at the gigantic Amphitheatre, Mario looked at her with an indefinable expression. Then he softly patted the hand which clung to his arm, and murmured, pityingly, "*Poveretta!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE parting that night Mario had said a word to Violet about keeping their engagement secret. Violet had declared that she must tell her aunt, but would tell no one else; and to this Mario had assented. He would have preferred to keep even Miss Baines out of their confidence for the present, but he yielded to Violet's pleading.

"I am a poor man, *tesoro mio*," he said. "Your family will think you have done ill to promise yourself to me."

"I have no family except Aunt Betsy," she answered. "None, at all events, that I need consider. Aunt Betsy has been mother and father and sister and brother to me all my life. And she will love any one whom I love,—and who loves me."

"Some one might love you who had money as well as love."

"But the some one wouldn't be *you!* So what is the use of imagining it?"

So long as he was under the charm of her presence, and her voice, and her touch, Mario was sufficiently in love to be happy and elated. But as he walked home alone, after leaving her at her own door, sundry thoughts of Boscombroso and poverty intruded themselves like little chill breezes into his glowing mood. But they did not materially lower its temperature. And he fell asleep thinking of Violet's sweet face in the moonlight, of the trusting, tearful smile with which she had told him that she loved him, and of the soft warm clasp of her hand.

Poor Miss Baines's consternation when she heard Violet's news was unspeakable. What should she do? How should she tell Uncle Joshua? And yet how could she dare to keep it from him? And then in any case it could not be kept secret from him for ever. These considerations presented themselves to Miss Baines's mind over and over again, and she was unable to find a satisfactory answer to them. She was very little more worldly-wise than her niece. But she did to some extent recognise the desirability of having an income to live on; and, not being in love with Captain Masi, she was able to conceive that there might be sublunary troubles for the woman who should marry that winning and attractive personage. Violet did not shut her eyes to the prospect of their being poor, and of having possibly to resist opposition from Uncle Joshua and others. But she thought her happiness would be cheaply purchased at the cost of such evils as those. The difference between her point of view and her aunt's was, perhaps, rather in appreciating the value of the object to be attained, than in any self-delusion as to the price to be paid for it. In her heart Miss Baines wished that the summons to return to England had come sooner. Then this love-story would have remained in the nebulous regions of things that might have been.

Uncle Joshua's letter had been very peremptory, and more than usually ill-natured. He had required his niece Elizabeth's immediate return home, since, if she were well enough to be going about in society "*among a parcel of foreigners*" (he had scored this underneath, as if it were a peculiar proof of robust health reprehensibly employed), she must be well enough to come and attend to her natural duties. And he expressed his opinion that Violet had had as much gadding about as was good for her, if not more; and she was bound to think a little "of them that stood in the place of a parent and guardian to her." The letter terminated by a threat very intelligible to Miss Baines: "I have the power, and I have the intentions, to put my grand-niece in a comfortable and respectable position for life. And I might not be going out of bounds to say more than that, if I wanted to boast. But my intentions are guided by the strictest principles; and them that don't behave to please me needn't expect to be pleased *by* me."

Violet had at first been inclined to rebel against this sudden order to return. Why should they be hurried back thus peremptorily? It might even be dangerous for her aunt's health to take such a journey in the heart of the winter. And in this suggestion she was perfectly sincere. Cruel as it was to herself to leave Rome, her own selfish pain was not her single or supreme consideration. But Aunt Betsy had shown unexpected resolution, and had asserted her intention of obeying Mr. Higgins's behest in a manner which, for her, was absolutely stern. She had the courage to oppose Violet's wish in Violet's own interests. It would never do seriously to offend Uncle Joshua. "When I am dead and gone," said Betsy Baines to herself, "my bit of money goes away to distant relations; and I might die any day. And if Uncle Joshua turned his back on her, what would become of my poor lamb?" So Violet had sobbed and submitted, and had made up her mind to go away, and be unhappy

in silence. Mario Masi would never know. Perhaps he might even despise her if he knew how weakly she had yielded up her heart before being asked for it.

But now that moonlight night at the Coliseum had changed everything. She was loved! Mario loved her! And so long as he loved her, she had an impervious shield against Fate's arrows. She even forgave Uncle Joshua's imperative summons home.

After she had told her news, Miss Baines dreaded fresh difficulties in the way of their departure. "We shall have to go, all the same, Violet," she had said, looking wistfully at her niece. "We must go."

And Violet answered that "he" would doubtless understand the necessity—that "he" would be the better reconciled to a short separation now that he was sure she was so very fond of him; and that "he" should not be too unhappy appeared to Violet the most essential point in the matter. Miss Baines was naturally less concerned on that score.

When Captain Masi came to see her the day after his declaration to Violet, he was struck by an indefinable change in Miss Baines's demeanour. She was gentle as usual, and not unkind, but there was something watchful and critical in her way of looking at him—a half-timid ruffling of her plumes, as of a hen alarmed for her chicken—which he had never seen in her before, and which made him say to himself: "*Per Bacco!* If even a possible aunt-in-law can put on this kind of air, I thank my stars that the trial of an actual mother-in-law is to be spared me!" He had an uneasy sense, as if invisible ligatures were being fastened on him—as if he were being taken possession of. He little guessed how heartily relieved that grim-looking elderly Englishwoman, with the anxious furrow on her forehead, would have been if he had, then and there, taken his leave of her for ever, provided always it could be accomplished without breaking Violet's heart.

Miss Baines's feeling in the whole matter was a little less sympathetic than might have been expected beforehand; considering that she was fond of sentiment in novels and poetry, and cried very easily over a love song. She would even have been ready to shed tears for Captain Masi if he had suffered from a hopeless attachment to Violet. But she had an inarticulate suspicion that Masi was taking it all too lightly; that he accepted at least as much devotion as he gave; and that he did not altogether realize his extraordinary good fortune. Miss Baines had never had any love romance of her own. But her theory on the subject was that the man might—nay, ought to—fall in love adoringly; but that it was the woman's part rather to let herself be loved with resigned condescension. Now Violet was not at all condescending towards her lover. And the usually gentle, placid Miss Baines felt a jealous irritation at witnessing her humility. Miss Baines had small faith in masculine magnanimity, and she felt serious fears lest Masi might gather an unjustly low estimate of Violet's claims on his devoted admiration, from her frank worship of himself.

This state of mind moved Miss Baines to greater firmness and pugnacity in discussing the engagement with Captain Masi, than would have been otherwise possible to her. He and Violet must not consider themselves bound to each other. Their prospects were far too uncertain. And, besides, Uncle Joshua's consent was an indispensable preliminary to a settled engagement. Against this statement Violet softly protested, but Miss Baines held firm. She explained to Captain Masi that Mr. Higgins had it in his power to make Violet comparatively rich, or to leave her without a penny; and that it was clearly necessary to conciliate him. "Besides which, I hope you don't deny that a young girl owes some duty to her elders, and those who stand in the position of parents to her," said Miss Baines. "And I think it right you should know just how Violet's circumstances stand. Whilst I

live she is to me as my own child. But after my death she will have just thirty pounds a year in all the world, unless her grand-uncle provides for her."

Masi somewhat raised himself in Miss Baines's estimation by the indifference with which he took the assurance of Violet's poverty. He had guessed that she was poor. And however much he might be blamed for rashly yielding to a selfish impulse in telling Violet that he loved her, he had certainly not been prompted by calculations of interest. "I am glad your niece has no fortune," he said. "I am a poor man. But other men find the means of making money, and I may find them. I will try. I will work."

"But have you nothing at all of your own?" asked Miss Baines, nervously blurting out the question.

"I have a little estate that was my father's, and a house on it. They are worth very little."

"Then I am sure you will all the more agree with me that Violet ought not to be held bound; at all events until you have some plain prospect of being able to marry."

"I would hold no woman bound except by her own will. How can I hold her bound?"

"I mean I think the engagement ought not to be talked about. We ought to keep the secret among ourselves."

To this Masi earnestly assented, and told her that he had already impressed the same thing on Violet last night.

Miss Baines was not without a secret hope that absence would first diminish and then extinguish Masi's passion. As to Violet, Miss Baines saw so very clearly that it was foolish in her to love Masi with such humility and devotion, that it was impossible to believe she would not see it herself sooner or later. Meanwhile the preparations for their departure gave her much to do. She set about endeavouring to find some one who would take the lodgings off her hands for the remainder of the term not yet expired. Her friend

Giorgi made himself busy in this service, and assumed, by a tacit understanding between him and Miss Baines, the post of first aide-de-camp and right-hand-man in general.

Mario and Violet were left pretty much at leisure to make love. The fewness of the days which remained to them for being together, excused Violet in her own eyes for devoting them almost exclusively to Mario. They must part so soon. For his part he needed no excuse for doing what was pleasant. The guileless devotion of this pure young girl was infinitely attractive. It was so true, and sweet, and innocent, that it seemed to fill his life as with a perfume of fresh flowers. And that was a very delicious moral atmosphere to breathe,—for a time. Without giving himself any account of his own motives, the knowledge that they were speedily to be separated made him throw himself more unreservedly into his part of a betrothed lover. There was no prospect of immediate and irrevocable shackles to check his enjoyment of the position. And his passion for Violet was fed both by being daily in her society and by knowing that he must soon lose it.

It was fed to the point of causing him seriously to consider what he should or could do in order to make her his wife. If he left the army, which would be a necessary preliminary to marrying a dowerless girl, he must find some means of eking out his patrimonial pittance.

In those days Gino Peretti was talking loudly amongst the more intimate *habitués* of Casa Guarini about the dazzling advantages of various schemes which he had in hand; and the fortunes to be made by shareholders when—a variety of circumstances should happen which had not yet happened, but were infallibly about to happen. Mario Masi was not insensible to the temptation of the prospect held out by Peretti. That stroke of the harlequin's wand which shall produce something out of nothing has a peculiar seductiveness

for certain temperaments. And there were some childish traits in Masi which made him an easy subject for that sort of mental mirage. It came naturally to him to believe in some special combination of circumstances which should give him exactly whatever he wanted. His credulity did not extend to dogmas which implied restraining rules of conduct; but it was wide and easy for superstitions and hopeful chances.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Signora Nina's neat *coupé* drew up at the door of the office of the *Star of Progress*, situated in an obscure street behind the Pantheon, one day about noon; and the Signora's daintily-shod feet picked their way up a staircase of incredible filthiness into a dingy room on the first floor, imperfectly lighted by a window looking into a narrow courtyard. The room was carpeted with dust over a brick flooring, and plentifully bespattered with ink. A portion of it was divided off by a wooden partition, with a sort of pigeon-hole in it, such as may be seen at the pay-place of a theatre. At a desk behind this partition, and commanding a view of a wide-spreading splash of ink on the opposite wall through the pigeon-hole, sat Telemaco Bini, writing a letter. It was a peculiarity of Bini that he could not be within reach of pen, ink, and paper for five minutes without writing a letter. At his place in Parliament he would scribble a dozen notes, in his cramped, illegible handwriting, during one sitting. And, whatever amount of unoccupied leisure he might have appeared to be enjoying the moment before, let him but go near writing materials and he became possessed with the necessity of improving the shining hour, and began to indite letters as if there were no longer an instant to lose.

Seeing the Signora Guarini, he rose, and removed his hat from his head and a cigar from between his teeth. But since, when he stood up, he presented only a section of his waistcoat to the eyes of a spectator on the other side of the partition, he was fain to sit down again for a moment in order to speak to Nina through the pigeon-hole.

"Do you want Nardi, Signora Nina?" he said. "He has just stepped out, and I promised to stay here until his return."

Dr. Angeloni was at that time the editor-in-chief of the *Star of Progress*, but his frequent absences from Rome, and the nature of his other engagements, threw the chief work of the paper on the sub-editor, Nardi, an industrious, dark-visaged young man in spectacles, who always looked as if he were physically as well as metaphorically "immersed in journalism," being steeped, as to the hands and shirt-cuffs, in printer's ink.

"Are you doing a leading article?" asked the Signora Guarini, with a glance at the slip of office paper on which Bini had been writing.

"No, not precisely. I was scribbling a few lines on business to one of my constituents in Porto Moresco. It is so hard to find five minutes for one's private affairs," returned Bini, who spent two mortal hours every afternoon of his life on the pavement outside a *café* in the Piazza Colonna. "Won't you go into the editor's room, Signora Nina? You can sit down there."

It certainly was not possible for her to sit down where she was. A solitary rush-bottomed chair, propped up against the wall, offered a trap for the unwary, inasmuch as it had but one front leg, and consequently tipped over the instant any inexperienced stranger endeavoured to seat himself on it. But Nina was no inexperienced stranger, and had avoided the rush-bottomed chair. She passed behind the partition and into a den beyond it, in which there was a writing-table covered with an untidy heap of papers, all gritty with blue pounce, a magenta-coloured sofa, and one tolerably

comfortable arm-chair. In this the Signora installed herself whilst Bini took his place on the sofa. She sat silent for so long that Bini at length inquired if he could do anything for her, or if she would wait for Nardi's return.

"No, I don't think I need wait for Nardi," she answered. "You will do as well." Nina was absent and meditative, and had not the bright, clear-headed, business manner which she usually assumed in her visits to that office. "Look here," she said, taking from an elegant little sealskin pouch by her side a cutting from a newspaper; "have you seen this?"

It was an article from a Neapolitan journal, famous as one of the most violent and uncompromising organs of the Clerical and reactionary party, which was called the *Messaggiero della Pace*, or "Messenger of Peace." The scope of the article was to make a fervid eulogium on a scheme which the writer "had reason to believe was on foot" for draining and reclaiming a large portion of the district between Lestra di Campolungo and Mattoccia, in the Pontine Marshes. Here was a project in which all Italians who loved their country could agree. It recalled those beneficent works for the amelioration of the condition of the poor which had ever distinguished the Papal and Legitimist Governments, and which had disappeared since the usurping hand of revolution, &c., &c., &c. Here the writer went off into the usual invectives against the Italian Government, which were, in fact, the *obbligato* accompaniment of every theme treated in those columns. But after a few paragraphs he returned to the point, and concluded thus: "We would fain believe that the rumour which has reached us is true, but we have small hope of seeing so good a project carried out by those at present in power. If carried out at all, it will probably be by private enterprise, and by the initiative of some of those great proprietors who, having remained faithful to their religion and their Sovereign, are trusted by the peasant classes as having their interests truly at heart."

Bini read the extract, put it down on the table before him, and made up his lips as if he were whistling. "Whew! What does *this* mean?" said he, looking steadfastly at Nina with raised eyebrows.

"Ah! then you had not seen it?" she exclaimed. "I thought so. And I would lay a wager that Nardi knows nothing of it either. The subject has not been touched on in the *Star*, has it?"

Bini took up a copy of the paper which was lying on the table.

"Not in this morning's number, of course," said Nina, impatiently. "I have seen that, naturally. But is anything being done for to-morrow?"

Bini could not tell for certain. He rather fancied Nardi had done something. Nina's eyes lighted on a packet of wet proofs whilst he was speaking. She turned them over, ruthlessly soiling a pair of delicate new gloves in the process, and in a few moments she had found what she sought for: namely, an article on the Pontine Marshes scheme, recommending it as fervidly as the Neapolitan journal, although on different grounds; and winding up with the following peroration:—

"But what can be expected from the myrmidons of the monarchy, the men who have sold not only their own, but their brother's birthright, for the miserable pottage of a portfolio? Let the gag be removed from the mouth and the gyve from the wrist of the true sovereign,—the real 'dispossessed Prince,' to whom Italy belongs by Right Divine;—let the People have universal suffrage, and we may arrive at a strong, just, and righteous Republican Government. But meanwhile between Clericals and Monarchists there is little to choose. Nor have we any expectation of seeing this really useful project effectually carried out, unless by the private enterprise of a few patriotic citizens, willing, even at some personal sacrifice, to assist the cause of the suffering proletariat!"

Bini read the slips after her as she rapidly ran

through them, and flung them aside, one after the other.

"*Ecco!*" she exclaimed when she had finished the last. "A nice *pasticcio* it would have been, if I had not thought of coming here this morning."

Bini, whose powers of synthesis were but mediocre, and whose fine tragic mask hid an essentially commonplace and rather dull character, looked at her in perplexity. "Nardi's article is all right, at all events, isn't it?" said he.

"What? In the face of that tirade in the *Messaggiero della Pace!* It must not appear on any account. Not on any account!"

"But why not?"

Nina was tempted imperiously to answer "Never mind why." But she checked the impulse with her habitual self-command. It was necessary to have patience, and to explain,—at least sufficiently to prevent Bini from ignorantly doing mischief. "This article in the *Messenger*," she said, "is not done by any of our people. It is a move of the enemy."

"But the enemy seems to be playing our game."

"That enemy plays no one's game but his own. Peretti has probably been unable to hold his tongue. The idea of the scheme has leaked out, and they are determined to be beforehand with us."

Bini frowned with an air of deep and grave meditation. But it was manifest to the keen eyes which were watching him that he did not yet understand the situation.

"The object of that article," pursued Nina, "is to force the thing; to draw public attention to it; and to run up the price——"

"Of the shares!" interrupted Bini with a look of sudden inspiration. Then he added less glibly, "Well, but then—so much the better for us."

"Not at all of the shares; of the land! To raise the price of the *land*. It is worth rather less than nothing to sell, as things are now. But once make that notion of

the Company popular, and it becomes as valuable as if it grew gold and petroleum ;—at all events for a time."

"But why,—since the land belongs to the State and to Ciccio Nasoni, whom they don't love,—why should the *Messenger* wish to add to the value of the land?"

"That is what I am not sure of. But I shall find a 'because' to that 'why.' I have a faint clue already. Meanwhile the whole thing must be written down by the *Star* without delay. You had better do something at once to replace Nardi's article."

"But Peretti——"

"Peretti does not want the whole world to think the plan a profitable one *before* he has got the concession. And then imagine giving the Right such an opportunity! Can't you see the leaders in the *Italia Monarchica* and the *Boccaccio* on the subject? 'We observe a striking and suspicious harmony between the Black *Messenger of Peace* and the Red *Star of Progress* respecting the bonification of the land round Mattoccia. Another proof, if proof were needed, that the two irreconcileable enemies of the peace and prosperity of Italy are in accord,' and so on, and so on. We know it by heart. But it would be damaging. Sit down, Bini. You had better just scribble off an article while I am here."

Bini made a faint last attempt at resistance: "Had we not better wait to ask Beppe whether—to see what Beppe thinks?"

"Beppe is not in Rome. If my husband had been here I should not have troubled myself to come to the office. I will answer for Beppe's approbation."

She insisted on Bini's taking his place in the arm-chair, pushed aside a mass of papers to make room for him to write, and took up her post on the dusty magenta-coloured sofa, announcing that she did not mean to leave it until Bini should have completed his task. She would not have treated him so cavalierly in the presence of a third person. One secret of Nina's influence was that she was careful to say her sweet

things before witnesses, and to reserve any necessary bitters for a *tête-à-tête*. Nine out of ten of the men around her did not so much desire that she should hold a high opinion of them, as that the other men should think she held it. And if Bini were treated with scant deference in private, he would feel himself amply compensated by and by, when the Signora praised his leading article before Silvotti and the rest, and gave him all the credit of having invented it.

Bini wrote on for some time. His pen did not move quite so rapidly as it had done in writing to the constituents at Porto Moresco. The sense that he was now doing his proper business as a journalist naturally damped his enjoyment. But he had a good deal of facility in stringing sentences together; and his flow of words was never checked by self-criticism. And so,—with a hint or two from Nina, neatly given in an interrogative form, as: "Wouldn't you touch on this point?" and "I suppose you mean to mention that point?"—the article got finished in a comparatively short time. The gist of it was an attack on the Ministry, and especially on the Minister of Public Works, for entertaining the iniquitous project of confiding the bonification of the Mattoccia district to the hands of the Clericals. If they touched it, it would be for selfish and reactionary ends. And, indeed, that they approved of it at all discredited the whole scheme. It was a mere speculation for improving the value of their own property, and promised nothing for the amelioration of the condition of their wretched serfs. Bini brought in the phrase from Nardi's article about the "myrmidons of the monarchy," which he considered a good, stout, journalistic common-place, with as much wear in it as a copper *soldo;* and like the *soldo* none the worse for being battered and greasy with use. He had a large collection of such current coin, and returned twenty of them in exchange for an adversary's silver *lira*, with a triumphant sense of giving the public something worth having. And, in fact, if coin were to

be chiefly used as missiles, the coppers would have incontestable advantages over gold and silver.

Nina read the slips as Bini wrote them. "Poor Gigi!" said she, when she had come to the end. "It is a little too hard on him. But what can one do?"

"Gigi" was Signor Luigi Silenzi, who held the portfolio of Public Works. In his day he had been a rebel and a conspirator, and many of his party could not see that the objects of his rebellion and conspiracy having been attained was any reason why he should leave off rebelling and conspiring. They mourned over Gigi's perversion to the ways of peace and legality, and would not be comforted.

"Do you think that is the sort of thing we want?" asked Bini, begging piteously for his bit of sugar.

"Yes, yes; capital!" answered Nina. "You have done it admirably." But she was still absent and meditative, and Bini felt that he had not yet had his due.

"When does Beppe come back?" he asked, as he escorted the Signora Guarini down the dirty stairs to her carriage.

"The day after to-morrow, perhaps. Come this evening. You may as well dine with me. There will only be old Giorgi, and we can have a talk before the others arrive. Good-bye. At seven."

Then, as she waved her hand to him from the *coupé*, Bini admitted to himself that his lump of sugar had been of handsome size. For an invitation to dine *en petit comité* at Casa Guarini was esteemed a special privilege, which placed its recipient in an enviable position with those who frequented that house, and it was a privilege not indiscriminately accorded.

Nina, as she drove home, leant back in the *coupé* with a thoughtful brow. "I have a good mind," said she to herself, "I really have almost determined to see Max myself." It would have astounded a large and influential section of Roman society to be told that by that familiar appellation of "Max" Nina Guarini mentally designated no less a personage than Massimiliano

Ludovico Giovanni Battista, Principe Nasoni, and the head of one of the most ancient and illustrious families of the "Black" nobility.

CHAPTER X.

"CAPTAIN MASI begs to see the Signora," said Pippo, the Guarinis' confidential servant, lifting up a corner of the curtain that hung over the study door. Nina was sitting in her rocking-chair by the fire. She was occupied with her own thoughts, to which the smoke from a cigarette furnished a hazy background.

"I gave you orders that I would receive no one before dinner," she answered, peremptorily.

"Yes; but Captain Masi begged me to bring the Signora this card. I thought I ought not to refuse that," returned Pippo, handing her the card. On it was written in English, in order to be unintelligible to the servant, "Will you see me as a special favour? I want to talk with you quietly for a quarter of an hour. I pray you not to send me away."

"Yes," said Nina, after a moment's reflection. "No one else, Pippo. You must say I am out if any one else calls."

In another minute Captain Masi was ushered into the study. It was warm, and dim, and fragrant. A wood fire burned redly in the open hearth, a single shaded lamp stood on the little table at the Signora's elbow, and the smell of her delicate Syrian tobacco was mingled with the perfume from a basket full of hot-house flowers. "Good evening, Masi," said the mistress of this retreat. "Sit down there." And she motioned him to a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace.

He bent over her hand for a moment, and then seated himself as she bade him. "Poof! How warm it is here!" he exclaimed.

"I hope so. I let the drawing-room remain below zero all the winter to please my Italian friends, and I have a cloak ready to put on when I am obliged to enter it. But my own den I warm as well as I can."

"My dear Signora, it is tropical!"

"If you suffer, draw that glass screen between you and the fire. There! Now, what is it you want?"

"First of all to thank you for receiving me."

"I deserve that. *Après?*"

"*Après*, I want your advice."

"What folly have you been committing?"

"Folly!"

"I have noticed that your coming to me for advice generally means that you want to be coaxed and comforted for having done something extra imprudent."

This came so unpleasantly near the truth in the present instance that Masi was nettled. "Oh! if the Signora is in one of her sarcastic moods I will not trouble her," he said, rising impetuously from his chair. Then he stood looking down at her jewelled fingers engaged in manufacturing a cigarette by means of the little machine on the table beside her. She coolly finished rolling a due portion of fine Turkish tobacco in its thin paper sheath, and then offered it to him.

"Well," said she, as he hesitated to take it, "what is the use of wasting time in these *enfantillages?* If you still feel young enough for such poutings and pettings I do not."

Masi cast a comprehensive glance at her rich black hair, the firm contour of her cheek, and the smooth, white hand which she held out to him. Then he burst out laughing, took the cigarette, gallantly kissed the fair fingers that gave it, and sat down again. "No woman who didn't look as young as you do would venture to talk as you do about not being young," said he.

"Indeed! I am always interested to hear these sage generalities about 'no woman' and 'all women.'"

"Well, I will own that you are different from any other woman I ever knew. You are an exception."

"Humph!" Nina smiled slightly to herself as she looked at him. His eyes were turned upward, watching with lazy enjoyment the rings of smoke curling round his head. "That is delicious tobacco, is it not?" she said. "I have just had a consignment of it from Smyrna.—Well, and now to business."

"Now to business. I wonder if you would tell me—I am sure you *could*—what is the real state of the Pontine Marshes Drainage and Amelioration Company?"

Nina pressed her hand on the arm of her chair, and looked at him earnestly. "What makes you ask?" she said, quietly.

"Well, the fact is that I have been hearing a good deal about it from Peretti lately. He's at the head of the project, you know. And I—if I—in short, if there is any money to be made—if the speculation is as good as he says—I should like to have some shares. I want to make money."

"Have you any sum at your disposal to invest?" asked the Signora, still in the same quiet voice.

"Yes; that is to say I have some money invested elsewhere that brings in very little—absurdly little. When one sees the way fortunes are made nowadays——"

"And lost."

"Oh, as to that, one can't lose what one doesn't possess! It's wretched work vegetating on a miserable pittance, when one good *coup* might make a rich man of one for life."

"One good *coup!*" repeated Nina, shaking her head. "As if a man were ever contented with one good *coup!* It is because men won't stop short, and sit down and enjoy their bit of good luck when they get it, that the gambling-tables make fortunes."

"You won't tell me what you think of Peretti's scheme?"

"My dear friend, it isn't easy to say off-hand. If I

were obliged to answer off-hand, I should say, 'Don't touch it.'"

"And if one had already touched it?"

"Ah, *Ecco!*" exclaimed Nina, throwing herself back in her chair. "I said so! You do something rash, and then you come to beg me to 'advise' you to do it!"

"But I have not told you I have done anything rash," returned Masi, with a little uneasy smile. "You need not disturb yourself."

"I? No, truly. It is not much to me; but it is something. I like you. You are not the worst among them."

"Too kind! I shall grow vain."

"*Basta!* It's mere waste of time discussing the irrevocable," said Nina, waving her hand. "What's done is done. Then having touched this scheme—what's the use of denying it to me?—my advice is to watch the favourable moment for selling out. The favourable moment may come;—but it won't last long. You know me. I can hold my tongue. But when I do give my friends a word of advice, it is honest advice."

"Yes; I'm sure of that. And,—after all, the thing may turn out a gold mine for us all! I am persuaded there are wonderful possibilities. You see you probably have not gone into details as much as——. Financial calculations are not women's strong point, are they?"

If Nina had not been sure of it before, this speech of Masi's, and his look, and his manner would have convinced her that he already stood committed to join Peretti's speculation in some fashion or other. She merely nodded; understanding very well that Masi was talking rather to persuade himself than his audience, and being accustomed to act on her own *dictum*, that it was mere waste of time to discuss the irrevocable.

"The Press could do a great deal to push the thing, couldn't it?" continued Masi.

"Something. Not, perhaps, so much as you think."

"You have often said it was a pity that I did not make more use of the talents I have. I believe you were right."

"Certainly. But then unfortunately industry is not one of your talents."

"I *have* a gift for writing, though, have I not? You remember that little volume of poems I brought out, 'Echoes of the Abruzzi?' They succeeded very well. Every one praised them."

"Yes; and they were pretty. But you were not paid for them."

"No, because I was a blockhead! I have learnt better now."

"*Bravo!*"

"I can write my own language at any rate. And that's more than most of these newspaper fellows can pretend to."

There was a short silence. Then Nina said, looking full at him, "Are you going to write in a newspaper, Masi?"

"*Per Bacco!* How did you guess? Yes."

"Can you tell me in what newspaper?"

"No; I must not tell you,—yet."

Nina sat silent for a few minutes with her eyes fixed on the fire, and softly and soundlessly clapping the palms of her hands together.

"Don't you think it will be a good chance for me?" said Masi. "You have preached to me for years to make the best of my gifts. And it's the sort of thing I can do without interfering with my duty, Signora Nina. I wish you would tell me just what you think."

"Do you?"

"Yes; of course I do."

"Well, I will tell you what I think, Masi. You need not answer me, nor say whether I am right or wrong. I think that Gino Peretti is going to set up a newspaper with other people's money; I think the main scope of his newspaper will be to push his own financial speculations; I think he may get something

out of it all, for himself; I think no one else—unless one or two old hands who know the game—will get anything."

Masi pitched his cigarette into the fire with a sudden movement, and rubbed his left hand through his short curly hair. "Would Beppe be vexed or angry if—if it were as you say?" he asked.

"Beppe Why?"

"I mean—about a rival newspaper."

"Oh!" Then after a short pause,—"Beppe would think it so much the worse for the rival newspaper. Besides,—*caro mio*, don't you know? None of them pay."

"Ha! So they say. But I suppose that Beppe, for instance, finds his *quid pro quo*, or he wouldn't spend his money in that fashion."

"Certainly. When there is no *quid pro quo* the journal dies;—and sometimes the journalist."

"Bah! Nothing venture, nothing win!"

"What do you want to win, Masi, that is worth venturing so much for?"

"I'm in love."

"Ah!" (with an indescribable accent, half incredulous, half indifferent). "Well, but even so—I don't quite see——?"

"I want to be married."

"Good heavens!" and Nina gave a little laugh.

A deep angry flush rose to Masi's forehead. There was something curiously volcanic in the change which came over his face;—a moment's vivid glare, and then not calm but a threatening quietude that seemed to hold its breath till the next explosion. Nina's half-contemptuous manner profoundly irritated him, because it gave voice and emphasis to certain internal misgivings of his own that he had made a fool of himself. "I am engaged to be married, Signora," he said loftily.

Nina looked at him with sudden attention, but she did not speak.

"My future wife," continued Masi, "has no money."

"Are you serious? Yes, I see you are."

"I have always told you that if I married, it was my destiny to marry a portionless girl. I was right there, you see, Signora."

"And who——. Ah! Is it some one I know?"

Nina's manner was neither indifferent nor contemptuous now, but very earnest, and even anxious.

"I wonder you have not guessed—you who are so keen and observant."

"The little English girl!"

"Violet Moore."

The Signora Nina clasped her hands together tightly on her lap, and looking straight before her as if at something far away, she muttered in a low voice, "*Poveretta!*"

It was the same word he had himself used to Violet. But coming from Nina's lips it made him wince like the touch of a red-hot iron.

"I never guessed this," she continued; "but I did not see you much together. And besides, they are going away. The poor child wrote me a little letter to tell me, and to say she would come here to bid me 'good-bye.' But since Beppe went to Milan I have been so much occupied that I have not seen her lately. And she loves you, then?" Nina spoke in disjointed sentences, absently, almost moodily; and her face wore a troubled look.

"Violetta loves me with all her heart. And she has a heart, this little snow-white English girl!"

"And you,—who are not snow-white,—do you love her?"

"What a question! Certainly I love her."

"With what is left of your heart."

An idea darted into Masi's mind which at once mitigated his resentment at Nina's tone; was it possible that she was jealous? Women were such curious creatures. Although she had never, it must be owned, shown the slightest desire to appropriate his devotion to herself, she might perhaps find it disagreeable to see him bestow it on another woman. Nina remained

immersed in thought for several minutes, leaning her head on her hand; during which interim Masi also looked as though he were engaged in serious and somewhat painful meditations; but the regret most keenly present to his mind at the moment was that he should so hastily have thrown away his unfinished cigarette.

"Do they still mean to leave Rome, Violet and her aunt?" asked the Signora at length.

"Yes; they must go for a time."

"And when do they come back."

"Ah, who knows? Nothing is settled."

"Look here, Masi, let us speak plainly. This is a very foolish business."

He shrugged his shoulders. "What would you have? I never set up for wisdom."

"Just imagine yourself—where's your cigarette? Take another. There are some ready made on the chimney-piece near you.—Fancy yourself, Mario Masi, a poor man with a wife and family! What would you do? How would you live?"

"On love," answered Masi indistinctly, much enjoying a fragrant puff of the fresh cigarette.

"I don't know any human being less likely to content himself with that dish as *pièce de resistance*."

"No one would be content with it, my dear Signora. Don't let us talk sentimental nonsense."

"Exactly. And with those views you propose to marry a penniless girl and to leave the army?"

"I have often told you that, if I married at all, it was my destiny to marry a girl as poor as myself. But there is money to be made. Other men find the way to do it, and why should not I? I mean to try, I assure you."

"Well and good. But would it not have been better to try *before* you turned this poor child's head with your love-making? Ah, Masi, Masi, what a foolish business!"

"You are very flattering and friendly, *Signora Nina gentilissima!*"

"I'm not flattering, precisely because I am friendly. I take this matter to heart."

Masi impulsively rose and took her hand, which he carried to his lips. "You have always been good to me," he murmured. "But don't look so grave. I shall come through all right somehow. I believe in my luck."

"But I'm thinking of her! You don't know how fond I am of that girl."

Masi sat down again, and lightly flicked off the ashes from his cigarette.

"And I feel almost responsible," pursued Nina. "She used to meet you at my house."

"*Per Bacco!* Is it such a dire misfortune for her to have met me?"

"Ah, Masi, Masi, what a foolish business!" said Nina once more.

"Foolish or not, I'm in earnest. I didn't mean to speak; I really didn't. I had made up my mind to get leave and go away and forget it all. But then I—I met her accidentally, and I couldn't resist her sweet sorrowful face. And now the words are said and can't be unsaid. I mean to stick to them. I can be obstinate when I set my mind on a thing."

"*Basta!*" exclaimed Nina, with a little movement of her hand, as if she were casting something away. "Violetta is going. Who knows if she will come back! You won't die of love for any woman. And nothing is irremediable but death. Now you must go. I have to change my dress and write some letters before dinner. As to the Pontine Marshes scheme, I will just warn you not to be disturbed by anything you may see about it in the *Star of Progress*. I can't explain it all now. And I earnestly advise you to say as little about it as possible to any one for the present."

"All right, I will be prudence itself. And—— Oh, by the way, you won't mention my engagement? I made Violetta promise to keep it secret."

"That, at least, was sensible. I suppose you said to her that you meant to tell me?"

"How could I, when I *didn't* mean to tell you? It just slipped out. But she won't mind you. You are different from other people. I'm glad you think Beppe wouldn't take it ill in case I did join a rival newspaper. After all, one must do the best one can for oneself. *Addio!*"

"*Addio!*"

After he had gone, Nina sat for some time thinking over what he had told her; wondering, above all, if Violet Moore deeply and seriously loved him, or if it were a mere sentimental girlish fancy which time and absence would efface. "It is not every woman nor every man who *can* be thoroughly in love. I wonder if Violetta can! It's a mournful gift." That was the lesson Nina Guarini had learned from her life's experience. On the whole she derived a good deal of comfort as to her young friend's future from the knowledge that she was going away so soon. "Absence, absence, is the grand remedy—the great specific. Few cases are so desperate as to resist it long!" said Nina to herself.

Then she sat down and wrote two letters. The first was a rather long one addressed to her husband at Milan. The second was a mere note, and ran thus:

"VIOLETTA CARISSIMA,

"I feel guilty that I have not been to see you, but Guarini is away, and I have been much occupied. Do come to me this evening. If Miss Baines is too busy, or not well enough to accompany you, she need not fear to trust you to my care. I shall send my maid to fetch you in the *coupé* at nine o'clock. No *toilette!* Pray come, *chère enfant*. Spare an hour to

"Your *bien dévouée*,

"N. G."

The Signora Guarini made it a point to give as good a dinner to one or two guests—even though they might be personages of no greater consequence than Telemaco Bini and Giorgio Giorgi—as to a dozen. Every dish

at her table was *récherché* and well served on all occasions. Giorgi was somewhat of a *gourmet* (Heaven knows how he had acquired the needful taste and knowledge in a life of constant poverty and frequent privation!) and he enjoyed the fare in Casa Guarini understandingly. Bini, on the other hand, if not precisely greedy, was gifted with a voracious appetite; and devoured incredible quantities of maccaroni and other satisfying viands in a rather wolfish and indiscriminating fashion. Both men drank with great moderation, like most of their countrymen. But there needed no alcoholic stimulant to loosen their tongues. If there was net much conversation there was plenty of talk. Bini, who was not usually very loquacious, except on paper, launched out into elaborate expositions of his political views. These were chiefly of a negative nature; Bini's talent lying rather in the direction of blaming what Ministers did, than suggesting what they should do. The Signora Nina, mindful of his morning's work for the *Star of Progress*, listened with patience. And the Deputy for Porto Moresco enjoyed himself extremely, and verbally demolished every Cabinet Minister who had governed his country during the past ten years.

Giorgi, for his part, was less caustic than usual. Partly his mood was mitigated by a good dinner, and partly he was under the influence of a softening regret. He had been touched, after his fashion, by the simple kindliness of Miss Baines and Violet, and he was genuinely sorry when he thought of their going away. These Englishwomen seemed to him to possess that charm of helplessness and inexperience which so endears women to the men who are not called upon to take care of them through life. Over the coffee and cigars in the study Giorgi became almost pathetic on the subject of his friends' approaching departure.

"What!" exclaimed Bini. "The English Meess is not going away, is she?"

"I don't know which you mean," returned Giorgi,

who did know perfectly well; "but both Miss Baines and her niece are going away Very soon. Quite suddenly."

Bini's black eyebrows became more tragic than ever. "I did not know this," he said.

"I dare say not," answered Giorgi. "It wasn't likely you should. It has only been settled about a week. I'm sorry They are nice creatures—good, kind women."

This from his lips was equivalent to an extravagant panegyric from most persons.

"We are all sorry," observed Nina.

"I don't know what our friend the Captain will do," continued Giorgi. "He was there constantly, and I don't suppose it was for the *beaux yeux* of our good Miss Baines."

"The Captain! What Captain?" cried Bini, contemptuously "Masi? The Signorina never gave *him* a thought, I'm sure. Our dear Mario is a bit of a *blagueur*, and he fancies no woman can resist him. But I remember—it was in this very house, Signora Nina—once, when he had been talk, talk, talking to her the whole evening, the Signorina Violetta looked bored to death. She took my arm quite eagerly. I don't mean to say that that was meant as any special mark of preference for me——"

"Why not? Costs nothing to say it," muttered old Giorgi, eating up the remains of the lump of sugar at the bottom of his coffee-cup.

"But I must declare that the poor Signorina seemed glad to get away from him. He actually offered her his arm, even then; but she took mine. Some men have no tact, and don't see when they're tiresome."

"How well you know each other!" remarked the Signora, gravely

CHAPTER XI.

EVERY man has his peculiar temptation. So, perhaps, has every class and every nation. The seduction which specially beset a certain set of Italians in Rome at the period of which we are writing, was the setting up of newspapers. It is not surprising that many persons should be anxious to sell what most persons are willing to buy. But in this case there was no theory of supply and demand to account for the facts which manifested themselves with the traditional stubbornness that belongs to them. The newspapers already existing made—with one or two exceptions—but a poor shift to live. And yet, week after week, fresh programmes were issued; and people were found to pay, if not for the writing, at least for the printing of some new political, humorous, social, or socialistic journal, which fluttered out a brief, and not brilliant, existence, and finally settled down into the greasy oblivion of the butter-shop.

The great science which so specially distinguishes, and has set its mark on the present century, the science of advertising, is even yet in a very rudimentary condition in Italy. One would not *à priori* suppose it to be very difficult of attainment; at all events not difficult of imitation any more than the art of making an egg stand perpendicularly when once some Columbus has shown us how to crush the narrow end. But poverty, frugality, and suspicion are three things unfavourable to the full development of advertising. People who earn much are invariably willing to risk much. People who deny themselves no luxury, find their wants keep pace with their self-indulgence. But a poor population, which is at once traditionally conservative and profoundly sceptical, offers considerable resistance—if only of an inert kind—to the progress

of advertising. Now advertisements are to modern journalism what gunpowder is to artillery. Your thunderous leading article may be a very heavy projectile, but it is the expansive force of the patent medicine vendor, the auctioneer, and the silk mercer that makes it travel. Italian newspapers are for the most part occupied with the promulgation of notions rather than nostrums, and the conflict of rival parties instead of rival pills; with the result, in many cases, of bankruptcy.

The above considerations, although simple and obvious enough, had never occurred to Gino Peretti. And even had they occurred to him they would not have hindered him from trying to set up a new daily paper. A very short existence would enable the journal to do all that he expected of it. He did not intend to risk much hard cash in the speculation. And he perceived, or thought he perceived, that it would not be difficult to persuade others to advance what was absolutely necessary for the working expenses. Mario Masi was willing to join the affair; and had a sum of money at his disposition which would be sufficient at least to start the newspaper. Nor must it be supposed that Peretti deliberately intended to lead Masi into making a disastrous investment. Peretti's temperament had not enough sanguine hopefulness to induce him to plunge deeply into journalistic speculation himself, but it had quite sufficient to make him believe in the buoyancy of his friends.

Nina Guarini's guess had been correct, so far as it went. Mario had already done something rash before he "asked her advice" about it. But she did not know how far he was already compromised. With her practical mind she determined, however, to do what she could to help him—chiefly for Violet's sake, but also somewhat for his own. The worst was that Masi was not thoroughly sincere with her, and did not tell her accurately how his case stood. He was not precisely afraid of the Signora Nina's judgment, and he

would not have shrunk from confessing any folly to her after he had committed it, but he had the cunning of a child, who does not want to be saved beforehand from a danger he is bent on running into. What he was bent on was becoming a political writer, and establishing an influential newspaper. His pet vanity was his literary talent, and Gino Peretti had flattered this vanity for his own ends. The hope of gain from the Pontine Marshes scheme was really subsidiary in Masi's mind to the pleasure of becoming known in the Republic of Letters. We do not always—nor, perhaps, even chiefly—pursue what is commonly called our interest in this world. The pettiest passions are able to over-ride it; and there are probably few actions committed of which pecuniary interest is the sole prompter. Even Gino Peretti, who was greedy of money, would have found the salt and savour greatly diminished in his existence if, instead of the excitement of speculation, with its fluctuations of success and failure, and the importance it conferred on him in the eyes of his peers, he were bound to receive safe gains in secrecy. And yet Peretti was more than half unconscious of this in himself, and would have jeeringly repudiated any motive in his dealings, save the motive of making money.

It has been stated that Nina Guarini wrote a long letter to her husband at Milan. The gist of it was to tell him of her interference with the editing of the *Star of Progress*, and to call his attention to the article in the *Messenger of Peace*. Beppe replied, approving what she had done. But when he came home he declared that his interest in the matter was solely for the party, since he himself had resolved to have nothing to do with the Pontine Marshes scheme. If the Extreme Left could carry it through, he should be glad, as it would constitute a tangible proof of their interest in improving the condition of the agricultural classes. But, from a business point of view, he did not think much of it. The article in the *Messenger of*

Peace was enough to prove that Peretti and Co. were not going to be allowed to walk over the course. "There is clearly," said Beppe, "some 'Black' landed interest at stake. Perhaps it is Ciccio Nasoni's—whom I never believed in—perhaps another's. Between the two, there won't be much to be made by the shares."

"Then you have decided not to touch it?" asked Nina.

"Yes. It would require a great deal of time and trouble if I took it up seriously, and there are too many other more important matters on hand. Jules Bonnet is very keen about the new joint-stock bank, and then there is the Sardinian Land Company and the branch line to Porto Moresco to get passed through the House."

"May I do the best I can for the Pontine Marshes Company? Will you give me *carte blanche?*"

"Do you mean to invest in it on your own account? Don't dip deep!"

"I don't mean to dip at all. But Masi has dipped, I'm afraid, and I want to help him."

Beppe gave her one quick look. "Why do you want to help Masi?" said he. "I suppose it is not for his *beaux yeux?*"

"You may safely suppose so, and you might even safely bet on it. Nevertheless, it is for some one's *beaux yeux*. It is for the *beaux yeux* of a woman who is fond of him, and whom I am fond of."

"Humph! I'm afraid you will have rather an extensive business on hand if you interest yourself in every heroine of every one of Masi's *amourettes*," answered Beppe, drily.

"This is not an *amourette*—it is a serious matter."

"Really?"

"A marrying matter."

"Nonsense! Masi? Ah! Then I know the woman, if it's really serious and you say you're fond of her. The only woman you have seemed to care a straw for for years is——"

Nina gently put her hand on his mouth. "Yes;" said she. "You are right. But it is a secret."

"And you think you can help them in the matter of the Pontine Marshes scheme?"

"I am pretty sure that I can put a spoke into the wheel of the *Messenger of Peace*."

"*Benissimo!* Of course you can do as you think best. I'll trust you not to commit a *gaucherie*. I never knew you do so yet. But listen, Nina, if you find you really can give the Company a lift, you must have your due and fair *quid pro quo*. It's a bad plan to mix sentiment with business;—spoils both."

When his wife mentioned to him Peretti's scheme for establishing a new journal, Beppe merely shrugged his shoulders. "This mania for setting up newspapers is an epidemic. New disorders are in the air sometimes. We knew nothing about diphtheria, for instance, when I was a boy," said Signor Guarini philosophically. As his wife had foretold, he was neither angry nor jealous at the prospect of a rival journal. "Until some one appears who is willing to spend as much money on a daily paper as I spend on the *Star*, without getting any percentage in return, I think we need not fear rivalry," he said. "Gino Peretti will certainly not be that somebody."

Just at that time the Italian Parliament was taking a short Christmas vacation; and honourable members were scattered far and wide throughout the length and breadth of the peninsula, from the Alps to Etna, and from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic. As soon as the day for their reassembling was fixed, Gino Peretti came to see his friend Beppe Guarini, and revealed to him with every expression of friendly confidence his project of bringing out a new journal, adding several of his accustomed flourishes about his own sincerity and straightforwardness, and so forth.

"When do you bring out your first number?" asked Guarini quietly.

The other man thoroughly understood the bearing of the question, and put himself at once on the defensive.

"We begin with the Session. Almost immediately. Of course there's no time to stand shilly-shally That's not my way. When once a thing is resolved on in my mind, I act. You think I might have mentioned the matter to you before——"

"It doesn't matter a straw," interposed Guarini.

"Yes, yes; I beg your pardon. I'm not a simpleton. You think I ought to have spoken before. But the final decision was only taken yesterday afternoon. And the instant it *was* taken, I sent our preliminary announcement to the printer. Here it is."

"Sharp work!" observed Guarini, who knew Peretti's statement to be a lie.

"I always make sharp work. There's our programme"

It was a comprehensive programme without doubt. The new paper was to be entirely independent in its views (a statement which a malicious and experienced politician afterwards interpreted as meaning "still open to a bid"); and was to uphold the cause of truth, freedom, righteousness, literature, art, social progress, electoral reform, and financial honesty.

Beppe took the whole matter very easily. Besides having a considerable share of native good nature, he had learned practical, if not theoretical, tolerance in wider horizons than ever met the view of such men as Gino Peretti. The "world" which the latter boasted of knowing consisted of very few and simple elements; whereas Guarini's "world" comprised several European countries, and a great variety of social classes. On many points there was the same sort of difference between the two men, as may be observed between a boy brought up at home, and one who has had to struggle amidst the competition of a public school. As to one thing Beppe was inexorably firm; he would have nothing to do with the Pontine Marshes Drainage and Amelioration

Company. Peretti set forth his view of its advantages with cynical frankness. "I don't know," said he, "how much good it may do to the peasantry of the district—worse off than they are now they can't be anyway!—but I'm sure it will be an affair of gold for us if we can get the concession. My plan would be not to carry out the works ourselves, but to cede the contract as soon as ever the thing was passed through Parliament, and then wash our hands of it. Big contracts of that kind are too risky."

"Very good, Gino," returned his friend. "I won't join you, but I won't hinder you. You shall have a puff preliminary for your new paper in the next number of the *Star of Progress*."

"And for the Company?"

"No; I have told you I don't mean to meddle with the Company."

"The *Star* did meddle the other day. It had an absolutely hostile article."

"Oh, yes! in answer to the *Messenger of Peace*. Well, wasn't it the best thing that we could have done for you?"

"I don't say no;—for the moment."

"Have you come to the bottom of that tirade in the *Messenger?*"

"Not I. How should I? I don't know a creature belonging to the Black lot except Ciccio Nasoni. I tried to see Ciccio a week ago, but he was away; gone down into the country for shooting, they told me."

"Aha!"

"You see, the sound of my name would be enough to make any of that party set up their quills. You know they have a perfect horror of me. I'm their bugbear."

Guarini thought within himself that his friend exaggerated both the susceptibilities of the Clerical party and his own power of exciting them, but he forbore to say so.

"But you, Beppe," pursued Peretti—"you who have so many channels of information, might find out something—hey?"

"If I do I'll let you know," answered Beppe; and so they parted.

The Signora Nina's resolve to help Masi had been quickened and intensified by an interview she had had with Violet. The girl had obeyed her friend's summons on the evening described in the last chapter, and Nina had taken her aside, and said a few affectionate words to her about Masi.

"How did you guess?" asked Violet, innocently. She felt that it would be very sweet to talk about Mario to this kind woman friend, who was younger than Aunt Betsy and who—perhaps for that reason—Violet instinctively felt would be more sympathizing on this subject. But in her staunch loyalty to her lover she checked the impulse to speak, and added almost immediately: "But, dear Signora Nina, we must say no more now on this subject. I'm sure you will not ask me when I tell you that my lips are sealed by a promise."

"If that is all, my dear Quixotic *Inglesina*, you may unseal your pretty lips as soon as you please. Masi told me himself."

"Mario told you!"

"Yes, *chère petite*. He knew I was fond of you, and he thought you were fond of me, and that you wouldn't mind my knowing your secret. I will keep it, believe me."

"Mario told you!" repeated Violet. And her friend saw that she was pained. "It was only an hour or two ago, *cara*," Nina hastened to add. "There has not been time for him to see you since." She thought that Violet felt some touch of jealous displeasure at not having been informed of her lover's confidence. But this was not the feeling in the girl's mind. That Mario's act should have been contrary to his word; that after making her solemnly promise to keep

secrecy, he himself should have broken it,—this it was that hurt and perplexed her. "You are not vexed because I know, Violet?" said Nina watching her face. "No; it is not that. I like you to know." But neither then nor ever did Nina Guarini understand Violet's view of the subject, nor what it was that had brought that shocked white look into her face. Nina could understand vexation at being deceived. But it never entered into her calculations that Violet should be hurt not for herself, but for him; for the tarnishing of his bright image in her mind. Not even an innocent romantic girl in love, thought Nina, could believe in the absolute truthfulness of her lover, or seriously expect any man to mean what he said, all that he said, and nothing but what he said.

In the experience of a world which she had found mostly despicable when it was not sad or bitter, Nina looked on inexperienced Violet Moore, at the threshold of woman's life, much as a benevolent European might have looked on the native of a newly-discovered South Sea island. Knowledge has to come, but it costs dear. And the gentle Otaheitan often buys our science at an absolutely fatal price.

After the first few words, Madame Guarini spoke of the imprudence of a settled engagement under the circumstances; and even ventured to hint at the possibility that time and absence might change both their minds. But she found Violet impervious to any such suggestions. They loved each other. They could wait. They knew they must wait. For her part she was not only content, but proud and happy. She only wished she were more worthy of the sacrifice that Mario would make in marrying her. "Do you know, Signora Nina," she said, "that I have nothing?"

"Not now. But you have expectations—an inheritance to look forward to. Miss Baines spoke to me once of a rich uncle."

"Oh, that is Aunt Betsy's dream. But the truth

is I don't believe Uncle Joshua is very fond of me. And at all events I don't count on his money. No; I am quite dependent on my kind aunt. I believe that some day I may perhaps inherit something less than a thousand francs a year which she has power to bequeath to me. But of my very own I have nothing."

"And does Masi know all these details?"

"Of course," returned Violet, opening wide eyes of astonishment. Then with a merry laugh, "Oh, you need not be afraid that he has chosen me under the delusion that I am an heiress. I shall not have to make any terrible revelation like a heroine in a romance."

Violet's cheerful trustfulness in the future made her friend sadder than any fretful repinings could have done. It seemed to her so piteous. But Nina, whatever her acquired defects might be, was not at all events given to the indulgence of vain sentimentality. Her energetic spirit spurred her to action. "Unexpected things happen every day," she said to herself, thinking over the interview when Violet had gone home. "It may be that Masi is in earnest for once, and will put his shoulder manfully to the wheel, for the sake of this sweet girl who loves him—as he could never have hoped to be loved." The Signora was not flatteringly sanguine as to Captain Masi's final perseverance against difficulties. But he should have what friendly help she could give him.

On the day after the publication of Peretti's exhaustive newspaper programme, Masi came to Madame Guarini and announced to her that he had "burnt his ships."

"What do you mean?"

"I've sent in my papers."

"It's not possible!"

"Very possible. I find that the newspaper work will take all my time if I'm to do it thoroughly. And I don't intend to half do it. I have made

up my mind to leave the army. In fact, it's done. There's no more to be said. I've sent in my papers."

Then it was that Nina resolved to begin her campaign in earnest and to see "Max."

CHAPTER XII.

THE Palazzo Nasoni is a shapeless, rambling, gloomy, unpicturesque pile of buildings at the very core of a tangle of dark squalid streets in the other portion of mediæval Rome. It has been built at various epochs, and with various aims. In its first origin it was simply a fortress, wherein a brood of ferocious nobles defended themselves behind stout battlements against kindred nobles equally ferocious; and sometimes against the hungry desperation of their non-noble fellow-creatures. Then came times when their privileges no longer needed to be defended by the sword—at all events not by their own swords; and when the family tree produced a Pope for Christendom, and put forth gorgeous crimson and purple blossoms from its rough baronial rind. Those were the days when the great suite of reception-rooms had been built; lofty, spacious, marble-paved, but neither warm, light, nor habitable. They were, in fact, not intended to be habitable; being due to the pompous ostentation of a certain Cardinal of the family, in whose mind the ancestral palace was not so much a house to dwell in, as an advantageous stage to be seen on. Home life there was none in the Cardinal's time. Such privacy as there was, retreated to a row of little back rooms like cells, which in summer were endurable owing to the thick old walls that kept the heat out, but which in winter struck melancholy to the soul and rheumatism to the bones. Late in the eighteenth century the head of the family had made a rich marriage, espousing the blue-eyed Austrian to whom Don Ciccio owed his colouring.

And the fortunes of the family, already sorely injured by wastefulness and obstinate nonconformity with the exigencies of a new and rapidly changing era, were in great measure restored by the bride's wide estates. An apartment built for the special use of this noble lady was still the most comfortable and cheerful—or the least uncomfortable and dreary—of the whole pile. It consisted of a two-storied building squeezed into the only sunny corner of the great courtyard. The bride's special rooms were on the first floor, and had once communicated with the Cardinal's suite, as it was called. But the door of communication had been walled up long ago, and the Quartiere Nuovo, or New Quarter (which designation it had now borne for over a hundred years) was approached by a winding staircase leading up from a low doorway in the courtyard. Above the Quartiere Nuovo was a set of low rooms, little more than garrets, formerly occupied by domestics when Casa Nasoni fed and housed a numerous body of retainers; below it, on the *entresol*, was a little residence generally let furnished to some stranger of whose character and antecedents the old Princess received satisfactory accounts. This tenant was often a foreign Catholic ecclesiastic; sometimes a lay personage of good family. Occasionally it was even an English heretic well recommended, able and willing to pay for the glory of writing "Palazzo Nasoni" on his visiting card, and with a genteel sentiment of attachment for the *ancien régime* in Rome: that same *régime* being a delightfully picturesque and historical old shoe which surely he never could have pinched any one, and which at all events cannot certainly pinch *us*, who have now for some centuries ceased to wear it. At one side of the doorway leading to the Quartiere Nuovo jutted out the base of the battlemented fourteenth-century tower, known as Tor Nasoni. On the other side was the private chapel of the family. The Princess inhabited the old part of the palace in shivering stateliness. Riccio, besides his bachelor lodging in the Corso, had

furnished a couple of small rooms in the tower, which were at his disposition whenever he chose to use them. And the Quartiere Nuovo was occupied by Prince Massimiliano, the head of the family, who had established himself there ever since his wife's death twenty years ago.

Massimiliano, or as he was familiarly called, Massimo, Nasoni was extremely unlike his son in appearance. The Prince had the high, somewhat stern, features and fine dark eyes of his family. He was now at fifty-five years of age, still a singularly handsome man. He had never in his life persevered in the pursuit of any one object for long together, except the object of preserving his personal attractions. His efforts in this direction had been crowned with the success which usually follows steady endeavour. He had too much taste, and too refined a knowledge of his subject, to make himself ridiculous by over-dyeing, padding, or pinching. His still abundant hair was grizzled, and made an agreeable contrast of tone with the eyebrows and moustaches which Nature had made, and Art kept, jet black. His beard, which had become very grey, was closely shaven. He had a slight and graceful figure, with a peculiarly erect and lofty carriage of the head and throat. When he smiled he showed two rows of perfect teeth, most of which were his own. His manner towards women had an insinuating melancholy softness, and towards men was marked by easy politeness which had but one blemish—a tendency to become obviously condescending. He had been born noble, rich, and handsome. At fifty-five years he had wasted prestige and patrimony, while the third good gift—beauty—the inexorable years were surely, if slowly, destroying inch by inch and line by line.

Perhaps there is not much moral superiority in a selfishness which is careless and unreflecting, over a selfishness which calculates and foresees. But undoubtedly the former is by most persons more easily forgiven and tolerated than the latter. Prince Massimo

Nasoni was popular with his dependents and familiars. His son, Don Francesco, Duca di Pontalto, was disliked. The father was *bon Prince*, and wasted his own and other folks' substance with a generous air. The son was socially a prig, and humanly a blockhead. But he made no debts, and the regularity of his conduct had been a source of great satisfaction to his grandmother, who had been used to point to him with pride as a specimen of the results achieved by a strictly careful and Catholic education. Soon after attaining his majority, however, Ciccio had scandalized his family and friends by a species of wild-oats sowing very different from the usual dissipations of youth. He had taken to politics and democracy. He had contested an election as Deputy for Rocca Sterile, and would have won it had his opponent not been an influential member of the Right, then in power, whose candidature was supported by all the Governmental officials of the neighbourhood. And now, under a Ministry of the Left, he announced his intention of standing again for Parliament at the earliest opportunity. People said how extraordinary this was, and that it would not have been half so surprising if the Prince, who was a black sheep, and led an unedifying life, had joined the "Sardinian party of revolution." But that Francesco should have done so—Francesco, the model pupil of that saintly woman his grandmother and her ecclesiastical *aides-de-camp*—this was indeed amazing and unaccountable. The fact was that Prince Nasoni, whatever might be his peccadilloes, considered himself a faithful son of the Church; and to strangers it was a puzzling spectacle to observe the admixture of superstitious bigotry and practical levity which distinguished that noble Roman. Don Ciccio was too cold for bigotry, and too dull for levity. He had hitherto only displayed two strong sentiments in his life. The first was a profound affection and admiration for himself; the second an equally profound dislike and disapproval of his father. The natures of the two men were not only different, but

antagonistic. And this it was, rather than any theoretic differences as to politics and religion, which kept them apart. It has been written by a keen observer of humanity, that "antipathies arise from the shock of characters, and not from the conflict of ideas."

Nina Guarini was well acquainted with the state of things in the Nasoni household—the loveless, rigid life of the old Princess, who compensated herself for voluntary sacrifices to theories she believed in by exacting involuntary sacrifices from other people who did not believe in them at all: the road to ruin on which the Prince had so far advanced, and was still advancing, with much gaiety of demeanour; the staid, shallow, and self-satisfied existence of Don Ciccio. The external circumstances of the family were known to "all Rome." But Nina had a clearer insight into them than fell to the share of "all Rome." After a brief deliberation, she sent the following note to Prince Nasoni:—

"I wish to have ten minutes' private talk with you on business. Tell me where I may be sure to find you. I will come to you. I prefer it. To-morrow or Thursday at any hour you may appoint. My messenger waits for an answer.

"NINA GUARINI, *née* LASZINSKA."

This note was brought to the Prince about noon, when he had just completed his toilet for the day, and was preparing to go out. When he saw the signature his slender, exquisitely cared-for white hand was not quite steady, and he kept his eyes fixed on the paper long enough to have read its contents three or four times over. At length he inquired of his servant—furtively watchful under an air of respectful indifference—if the bearer of that note were waiting.

"Yes, *Eccellenza*: in the ante-room."

"Tell him I shall write the answer immediately."

"Yes, *Eccellenza*."

The Prince promptly seated himself at an elegant little writing-desk, promptly took out writing materials, promptly dipped his pen in the ink—and then fell into a brown study for full ten minutes, with his head leaning on one hand, while the pen in the other hand idly traced arabesques over the blotting paper. "Nina Laszinska!" he murmured. "How the years go by!" Finally he roused himself, and wrote this answer:

"I shall be proud and honoured to receive you here to-morrow or Thursday, or any day. I would say 'at your own hour,' but that I know you to be categorical and imperative, and that when you bid me appoint a time I have no choice but to obey. I shall therefore wait at home alone to-morrow and every day this week until it suits you to appear, from four o'clock to seven P.M. I respectfully kiss your hands.

"MAX."

Then he rang for the messenger, and himself gave the note into his hands. Pippo, the grave and confidential, received it silently with a low bow, silently slipped it into his pocket, and silently went his way—much to the disappointment of the Prince's servant, who had been hovering in the hall in the hope of a chat, and who considered such close and reserved behaviour on the part of a fellow-domestic singularly ill-bred and offensive.

All the rest of that day Prince Nasoni wondered at intervals what could be the object of Madame Guarini's visit, and he made first one conjecture and then another. And then he recurred to the words "on business" in her note, and wondered what business question could possibly arise between them. And then he said to himself: "Pshaw! That's the phrase she chooses to use for whatever subject it may be that interests her." And then he fell silent and thoughtful, and contemplated himself attentively in the nearest looking-glass at his club, or his *café* or wherever he happened to be. And when he turned his back on a

côterie of intimate friends to go home that night, one or two of them remarked that Massimo was ageing, and that, moreover, his increasingly rapid progress towards the dogs was at length beginning to tell on his spirits.

The Prince's suspense, however, did not last long. The next afternoon, when the wintry dusk was settling down on the narrow streets around the Palazzo Nasoni, where the darkness arrived earlier and stayed longer than in other parts of the town, Nina Guarini, having left her carriage in a neighbouring piazza, proceeded on foot to the portal of the Palace. It was guarded by a tall and stout functionary in a cocked hat and long laced coat, holding in his hand a staff with a huge silver knob to it. The keeping this majestic porter—who on the great Church festivals appeared in a dazzling livery, knee-breeches, and bright pink stockings—was an expenditure which the old Princess could never be induced to curtail. Palazzo Nasoni had had a porter with a cocked hat and silver knobbed staff from time immemorial, and Palazzo Nasoni should continue to keep up that imposing institution, at least as long as she lived. His very change of costume on holidays was, she considered, a useful protest against the tendencies of the day, and a profession of adherence to the old system. When things went badly—and they sometimes had gone very badly—the Princess cut off a dish from the dinner of her household (first setting the example herself), diminished the allowance of oil, wore her black silk gown to an unwonted point of shabbiness, sent her horses to an estate in the country, dismissed her coachman, and put down her carriage. She had even consented to sell more than one of the "old masters" out of the Nasoni picture-gallery, and to replace them secretly on the walls by copies. But the porter remained perennial, neither did the glory of his cocked hat diminish nor the roseate hue of his silk stockings wax pale.

Past this incarnate symbol of so many facts and fancies, walked Nina Guarini in her elegant dark winter

robe and furs. He did not challenge her: did not even particularly notice her. There was an English lady now occupying the furnished apartment in the *entresol;* and her visitors passed in and out, without attracting the honour of much attention from the porter, whose opinion of his own importance was still higher than his mistress's, and who assumed as an axiom of conduct that it was running a foolish risk to be civil to any one *before* he tipped you. Nina crossed the gravelled courtyard, dark, dull, and silent at this hour, and made her way by the dim light of one lamp over the doorway, to the foot of the winding staircase that led to the Quartiere Nuovo. She mounted it with her firm, light, measured step, neither hasting nor lagging; passed the English lady's *entresol,* and stopping on the first floor rang at the bell, which pealed loudly in the lofty entrance hall. The first sound of it had scarcely begun to vibrate before the Prince himself opened the door, and admitted her.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALTHOUGH the antechamber was but faintly illuminated by one oil lamp suspended from the ceiling, Nina instantly recognized him. "You, Signor Principe!" she exclaimed in her quiet, matter-of-fact tones, "I am shocked to give you this trouble." And as he held the door open for her to pass, she entered the *salon* with a little graceful, self-possessed bend of the head. He was not so calm. His speech was more hurried than usual, and his manner slightly flustered. He placed a chair for her, and closed the door, and drew the *portière* across it before he spoke. "I thought it best," he said, "to admit you myself. I sent my man out of the way. As you said 'ten minutes' private talk' I thought you might prefer——"

"Just as you think best. To me it is of no consequence whether all the lackeys of Casa Nasoni see me here or not. But from your point of view I dare say you are right. Thanks for waiting for me, and for your prompt answer. I shall not detain you long."

By this time the Prince had seated himself opposite to her, and was looking at her earnestly. "You find me much changed, of course?" said he, uttering almost involuntarily the thought that was paramount in his mind.

"Not much changed since last week."

"Last week!"

"Yes; I think it was on Sunday that I saw you last. You were driving a pair of bay ponies in the Borghese."

"Ah! You saw me—? But I did not see you!"

"Naturally. I always drive in a closed *coupé*. And my liveries are not quite so remarkable or so well known as those of Casa Nasoni."

"Ah——then you have probably seen me at other times?"

"Frequently. At the theatre, on the Pincian, in various places."

"Fancy our living so near each other—you have been in Rome some time?"

"Several years."

"And we have never met!"

"Why should we have met? Neither of us wanted anything of the other."

The Prince shook his head deprecatingly. "Ah, you have not grown less severe," he said. "Indeed you are not changed at all. I never saw any one with whom the years had dealt so gently. But it is true, of course, that you were very young when last we met."

"All that matters nothing now. We have not met in Rome because your world and my world are as the poles asunder; because my husband is an active and influential member of the party which most of all is detested by you and yours; because you would consider it almost equivalent to apostasy to take his hand; and

because—to speak frankly—his friends would look on him as a renegade and a traitor if he took yours."

The Prince sat looking at her with a thoughtful face. "How your voice brings back the old times!" he said. "And you look so handsome, so tranquil, so free from care. I suppose he is good to you this—this Signor Guarini?"

"Yes; strangely enough, he continues good to me although I am good to him. But you probably won't quite comprehend the possibility of that."

"I don't deserve that," he answered. "I don't indeed. I desire most heartily that you should be happy. And I always have desired it, Evelina."

Her face changed suddenly and lost its smooth serenity. She thrust her hands out with the action of pushing something away. "Don't call me that," she exclaimed. "Don't use that name. No one has called me by it since I lost my sister."

"Lost! Is Marie dead?"

"She died six years ago. My only friend! The only being left whom I loved!"

Her voice was broken; her lips trembled. She seemed a different being from the bright, cool, *nonchalante* woman who had entered that room a few minutes ago.

"Were you with her?" asked Massimo in a low voice.

"With her? *I?* Her husband would not let her even see me if he could help it. But we met by stealth sometimes. And she wrote to me. She was alive, and she loved me. Then she fell ill, and I sent him imploring letters begging for news of her. They were never answered. At length, when the end was near, Baron von Hartstein wrote to me. Marie longed so greatly to see me that he took off his prohibition. I might go to her. The letter reached me in Paris. By the next train I set out and travelled night and day without stopping. It was a long journey. They were in North Germany at his country place. But I felt

neither fatigue nor hunger nor thirst. I rushed into the house with only one thought: I should see Marie. Her husband met me at the threshold. She was dead!"

There was a profound silence. Nina's face was white but tearless; and it was drawn and puckered like that of a person in bodily pain. After a pause she went on. "I have not spoken of her since to any one. It is strange that I should have been led to speak of her now; for I came here to-day to serve some one whom I first took a liking to because she reminded me of Marie. You remember her wavy chestnut hair? And the dimple when she smiled? She was fair like our mother. Oh, my Marie!"

All at once she covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Massimo rose and stood leaning on the mantelpiece with his back to her, and his head bent down on his folded arms.

"*Basta!*" exclaimed Nina at length, resolutely drying her eyes. "It is past. The unexpected alone is sure to happen. I expected nothing less than to break down or shed a tear in this house. Not one word more of all this. You have done all you could do;—you have been silent. And I thank you, Max, for not trying to console me with vain commonplaces. Let us shake hands. There! Now I am the Signora Guarini and you are the Prince Nasoni. And I don't mean to waste your Excellency's time."

Massimo looked at her wistfully. But he said nothing, and merely bowed in acquiescence.

"First of all," said Nina in her former manner, but not yet quite in her former steady voice, "do you know any of the people who write in the *Messenger of Peace?*"

"No. Stay,—I think, by the way, that my son's old director, Don Silvestro, has something to do with it."

"*Bene!* That's one. Secondly, have you heard anything about a new Company for draining and reclaiming the district around Mattoccia?"

"Mattoccia. That's where I have some property."

"Ah?"

"Yes; if I am not mistaken, I own some marshes and thickets there. By heaven, it would be good news to hear of a Company that would take it off my hands. They should have it a bargain."

"The land is yours, then?"

"I believe so. It has not been mortgaged like the rest, because no one would lend five francs on it. It produces a plentiful crop of fever, and, so far as I know, very little else."

"The land is yours, then, and not Don Francesco's?"

"Ciccio's? Not at all."

"It belonged, I heard, to his mother's family, the San Gemignanos?"

"Yes; but according to my marriage contract, it is mine. The San Gemignanos wanted a little estate that I had in the Romagna, which touched some land of theirs, and we made an exchange. It was not a good exchange for me. But I did not bargain. The lawyers managed it."

"A—a—a—h! Then it is absolutely yours, this bit of marsh and thicket?"

"Yes; if it were good arable land it would probably be mine no longer."

"Yours to sell, for instance?"

"Certainly."

"But—perhaps the Duke of Pontalto would not like you to sell the land?"

"And perhaps I don't care two straws whether the Duke of Pontalto would like it or not."

"*Povero Ciccio!* He has not the good fortune to please you."

"He has not the good taste to try."

"He probably looks on this land as part of his inheritance——"

"Inheritance! My son is a young man of very advanced views. His dear friends, the—the gentlemen who came into Rome by the breach of Porta Pia, have abolished primogeniture among other valuable things.

But I suppose my son would have applauded them still more heartily if they had abolished property altogether."

"Look here, Prince," said Nina after a brief pause. "I am going to tell you the exact truth. You know me well enough to believe that statement. Otherwise I find it more difficult to get the plain truth believed than anything else."

"I shall certainly believe whatever you do me the honour to tell me."

"Well, there is a Company about to be formed with the object of purchasing a large tract of land in the Pontine Marshes. The tract comprises nearly all the San Gemignano estate in those parts. As it is, it is worth almost nothing to you The Company may make it worth a great deal. But they will not buy the land of you according to its prospective value."

"I should not part with it for nothing."

"For nothing! Of course not. But I mean it is best to set any extravagant expectations at rest. In order to make the land valuable, all kinds of Governmental assistance will be required. And that assistance will be given by the Government to people who are known to be its friends, and not its enemies. You count among the latter. Nothing *you* could do would avail to obtain the desired concessions."

Massimo had been listening attentively. He here interrupted her. "Perhaps so," he said. "But, on the other hand, if I don't choose to sell, I spoil their project."

"Not necessarily. There are such things as Parliamentary Acts of expropriation in the interests of the public weal."

"Rascals!" muttered the Prince under his breath. He wished not to be offensive to Nina, but the phrase "public weal" in connection with the "Government of Revolution" disgusted him extremely.

Nina proceeded without taking any heed of the exclamation: "Or at worst, the promoters of the

scheme could abandon it for another, and your land would remain unsaleable for generations to come. Whereas if you sell now, you at least are sure of your money whether the Company sink or swim."

This prospect of ready money was a tempting bait to Prince Nasoni, and he admitted it frankly. "That sounds rather inviting," said he.

"It was supposed," continued Nina, "by some of our party,—by me amongst others,—that Mattoccia belonged to your son. Do you not think it possible that he supposes it does belong to him?"

"Eh? Well, I don't know. But now you suggest it, he may possibly suppose so. Unless, indeed, he has paid private visits to the family lawyer, and mastered the contents of my marriage contract. At his age—or for the matter of that, at my age, I should never have conceived such an idea. But Ciccio does not resemble me."

"My impression is that he looks on the estate as his;—prospectively at all events. I recognize Don Francesco's hand in this article of the *Messenger of Peace*. At least indirectly. And you tell me that his former spiritual director writes in it." She handed him the newspaper slip, which he read.

"Yes," he said, returning it to her, "I think that is Don Silvestro's style. And you will forgive me for saying that I agree with every word of it."

Nina raised her eyebrows and half closed her eyes. "One sees their game, of course," said she coolly. "And has your son said no word to you on the subject?"

"Not a word. He ought to have done so. It was his duty to have done so."

"Well, our people would rather deal with you than with him."

"Immensely flattered! But I wonder why. I thought my son was on excellent terms with the Revolution and all that belongs to it."

"No; he is not. And he never will be. Our party don't trust Don Ciccio."

"That does great credit to 'the party's' discernment," observed Don Ciccio's papa, with impartial frankness.

"To the point, Prince. Will you sell your land at Mattoccia?"

"Must I answer at once?"

"If you please. No time like the present."

"How I recognize your old promptitude!"

"And how I remember your old procrastination!"

Nina had recovered her usual manner. The sharpness of her words was mitigated by the low, gentle tones of her voice, and by an indefinable arch movement of the mouth, which was not quite a smile, but which conveyed the suggestion of playfulness. She was, moreover, a very attractive-looking woman, dressed with perfect elegance. To the numerous body of persons who consider only the essential merits of every question, quite apart from extraneous or superficial circumstances, it may appear incredible that Prince Massimo Nasoni should have thought any the better of the notion of selling his land because it was suggested to him by a black-haired, bright-eyed woman in a Paris bonnet and exquisitely gloved. But such was the fact. He would, to do him justice, have desired to serve Nina Laszinska had she appeared before him shabby, and faded, and grey-haired. But he certainly would not have been disposed in that case to think her opinion of so much value, or to listen to her with the same attention. The Prince was evidently a very singularly constituted man.

"I should not be indisposed to sell," said he at length, rather slowly.

"Good! I am not now empowered to make an offer, but it is well to know that an offer would at least be entertained."

Massimo looked at her curiously. "What a woman of business you have grown, M—Madame Guarini!" he said. "Where did you learn so much about affairs?"

"In a school where the instruction is obligatory—in

the hard school of the world. The discipline is severe, but the teaching is remarkably thorough, especially in certain departments."

"Alas! it is very true."

"I do not think you have much experience of what I mean!"

"Pardon!" said he, with a little air of pique. "The world has taught me something, too."

"Ah! but you have been a privileged pupil, Prince Massimiliano Nasoni, with a private apartment, and all sorts of fine things. I was on the foundation—rather a granite sort of foundation—where the terms are 'work or starve.'"

"Starve!" exclaimed the Prince, with a shocked, puzzled face. "Oh, come, come, you exaggerate!" He did not quite follow her humour, nor distinguish how much of literal earnest there was in words.

"Not at all. Nay, that was not such a bad condition. For some scholars the terms are 'work *and* starve.' But to return, *à propos* of starving, to your property in the Pontine Marshes. You are willing to treat with the Company for the purchase of it?"

"Y—yes, to *treat*. Through my own *avvocato*, not the family lawyer."

"I see. Better so. And your *avvocato's* address?"

"I will send it——"

"No, no, Prince; better give it me at once. It will save time. Be so very kind as to write it in my note-book." She handed him a little book with silver clasps and a silver pencil hanging to it. Massimo felt hurried off his feet, as it were, by her decision and force of will. He would fain have temporized and procrastinated. But the same indolence of temperament which led him mostly to put off a decision caused him sometimes to take one rashly, rather than struggle or hold back against pressure.

"There it is. You are as irresistible as of old," he said, returning the book with his most graceful bow.

"Just as irresistible as ever, neither more nor less!

No man has ever been able to deny me when I urged him to do what he liked."

"You allow one not even the poor merit of wishing to please you!"

"Yes, yes, I do; I am not too stupid to see that, believe me!" she answered, with a half-sad smile, which left her eyes melancholy, and softened all the expression of her face. Then, almost instantly resuming her hard, bright look, she added, "You agree that for the present it will be best to keep these negotiations secret?"

"By all means. Let the *fait accompli* fall like a thunderbolt from a clear sky—if, that is to say, the fact ever gets accomplished!"

"Don Ciccio will consider himself badly used, I foresee. But perhaps that does not much matter."

"To me, not at all. He has behaved ill in giving me no hint of what was in progress. It is clear he knew something of it."

"*Our* people will have no compunction about keeping him in the dark. He has been trying to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds; babbling to Don Silvestro, and those people of the *Messenger of Peace*."

Prince Massimo felt an odd movement of annoyance at hearing his son thus claimed, as it were, by the party whom Nina spoke of as "our people"—an annoyance quite disconnected from any fatherly sentiments towards Ciccio. "The whole position is incomprehensible to me," said the Prince, with his head more haughtily thrown back than usual. "That my son, a young man bearing the name he does, should have publicly allied himself with declared enemies to his Church and his Sovereign——"

"Oh, he will come back to the fold," interrupted Nina, composedly. "Ciccio is not brilliant, but I have always said that he has a certain perception of his own interests, which is often better than more shining qualities. People underrate him rather. He is slow, but retentive; and I am convinced that he never forgives. Oh, he is sure to come back to the fold.

You will see. And now, Prince, I will detain you no longer; and I thank you for receiving me."

She rose as she spoke, and drew her velvet mantle round her shoulders.

"Thank me! Oh, Nina, why use such words of course between us?"

He had risen when she rose, and now stood between her and the door, leaning his folded arms on the high back of a chair. "Must you go this moment?" he said, with a pleading look in his handsome dark eyes. "There are so many things I long to say to you!"

She pulled out a plain, massive, gold watch, somewhat larger than the toys usually carried by fine ladies, and looked at it.

Something in this cool, business-like action, and in her way of performing it, jarred unspeakably on Prince Massimo's nerves. "Can they be said within a quarter of an hour?" asked Madame Guarini, still regarding her watch.

"I don't know. Perhaps not in a quarter of a year! Perhaps not at all!" he answered, with sudden petulance. She looked up surprised. "I said you were not changed," he went on. "But you are changed. There is the handsome mask of the Nina of old days, and the keen brain behind it; but the heart is gone!"

She stood gazing at him with dilated eyes. He did not return her gaze, but began to walk up and down the room in an agitated manner, and to speak in short, broken sentences.

"Why should you be so hard and cold to me? I would do anything to serve you—anything! If you have suffered, so have I. There are moments when I would give anything to cancel the past. And yet there are also moments when I would give anything to live it over again, with all its troubles, and fevers, and sorrows. There has been no time so good since." He flung himself on to a couch and hid his face.

Nina stood looking at him.

She had once loved this man, and believed in him;

but now for many years she had ceased to do either. And Nina was not a woman to lull her own reason to sleep with romantic falsehoods, half recognized as false, yet fondly listened to because they were sweet-sounding. She saw Massimo Nasoni nearly as he was. And where her judgment of him erred, it was on the side of severity, not indulgence. She hid strong resentments, fiery pride, and scornfulness under her *insouciant* manner. She was by nature intolerant of weakness. She would help it—and often helped it; but in her heart she despised it; and Massimo's regrets and complaints touched no fibre of compassion in her.

All at once he looked up, and changed his tone, as if instinctively conscious of her want of sympathy. "I must beg you to forgive me," he said, rising. "We are not always able to command ourselves. You have enviable coolness."

"I told you, Prince, that my schooling had been harder than your schooling. You say you have suffered. That is the common lot. Not even a Prince Nasoni can be exempt from it. But what good can it do us now to recur to the past?"

"It would do me good to know that you had some lingering feeling of—of kindness for me. Your presence has touched many a chord that has been dead silent for years."

Nina struggled with herself. Her impulse was to pour out some of the lava flood of indignation accumulated through long years in her heart—to overwhelm with burning words this sleek, petted, perfumed fellow-creature, who had made her and those dear to her suffer in the days gone by, and whose lamentations over his own sufferings only stirred her contempt. "Self, self; he can feel for no one but himself!" she thought. But she had truly great self-command, and she was resolved not to baulk the success of her errand to that house by any childish outburst of temper. So she answered, with cool civility: "I do feel kindly towards you, Prince. Why not?"

But Nina, in her intense consciousness of her own past sufferings, and of the slighter nature of the man who had not suffered so much, because he could not, was a little unjust. Without sympathy there is no complete clairvoyance. Massimo's next words softened and humbled her.

"May I say one word more? Let me say it, for it is true! I have been deeply moved by what you have told me of Marie. Poor dear Marie! She was so sweet, and gentle, and loving! I hope she was happy in her marriage. She deserved to be happy. She was better than we were, Nina."

They were soft eyes, full of tears, that she turned on him now, as she answered: "She was better than any one I ever knew! Yes; I think she was not unhappy. Her husband adored her. He was hard to me, and that pained her generous heart. But she had some years of happiness. She was fond of you, Max. I ought not to forget that. I will not forget it."

She held out both her hands, which he clasped, and they stood for a second or two so, looking at each other through a mist of tears.

Then, very suddenly and swiftly, she withdrew her hands, and went out of the room and out of the house with soft soundless footsteps, and bowed head, like one who leaves the presence of the dead.

CHAPTER XIV

MANY years ago Massimo Nasoni, then Duke of Pontalto, as his son was now, had met Evelina Laszinska in Vienna. She was already married to a man whom she did not love, and whom no one could respect. He was from Russian Poland—a false, greedy, lazy, dishonest man, who gambled and cheated, and talked patriotism and kept his skin out of danger. His wife,

very young and strikingly handsome, was one of two Polish sisters of a noble family, whose father had spent half his life in exile in Paris, teaching languages or music, acting as amanuensis—living by what shifts he could. In his old age circumstances had opened to him the chance of earning a livelihood as musical librarian and copyist to a theatre in Vienna. Thither he had removed, and there he had died, leaving his elder daughter the wife of Casimir Laszinski. The younger girl, after her father's death, shared her sister's home. Laszinski's life was vile and despicable, and Laszinski's house was an ill home for youth and innocence. But it was a shelter, and Marie was grateful for it at first. When in the course of a very short time, she perceived that her fate had led her amongst foul and miry ways, she stayed on for her sister's sake. Evelina was of a bolder, more fiery temperament than Marie. She rebelled against fate, and desperately clutched at happiness, let it come whence it might. It was not so much any fixed principle of right-doing as a certain personal pride and self-esteem which kept her from falling utterly into shame and infamy. Her husband neither protected nor controlled her. The companions by whom he was surrounded were, for the most part, social outlaws—men and women who lived on the folly, extravagance, and vice of their fellow-creatures; parasites of the kind that are bred and fostered in the luxury and wickedness of great cities.

But among those who frequented the Laszinskis' house were two men of a different stamp from the rest. One was Baron August von Hartstein, a country gentleman from the north of Germany; the other, Massimiliano, Duke of Pontalto, then a young man on a visit to his noble Austrian relatives, and taking his full share of the gaieties and dissipations of gay, dissipated Vienna. Massimo very speedily captivated the imagination of Evelina Laszinska. Many an evening did he pass in the society of the two sisters, listening to their music, talking to them of Italy, of Art, of a

life very different from their present daily surroundings. Marie grew frankly to like this brilliant young Italian, who was so gentle and sympathetic, so simple and unaffected, and she came to rely on him and to confide in him as though he had been her brother. She had led a Bohemian sort of life, but their father had kept them apart from corrupting influences; and Marie found no difficulty in believing in the possibility of a fraternal affection between Max, as they called him, and her sister and herself. She saw some evil, and instinctively surmized more, among Laszinski's friends. But she saw that they were coarse, and low, and hard; whereas Max had gentleness, and gentlehood, and culture, and chivalry. Depravity of mind kills romance, but Marie was innocently romantic.

She had long been anxious to earn her own living as a teacher, and had openly discussed her plans with Max. Evelina had opposed her going out as a governess, chiefly on the ground that they would thus be separated. "If you leave me, Marie, my good angel leaves me," she used to say But at length Max found employment for Marie in the family of one of his Viennese relatives, where she gave daily lessons, but was still able to remain as an inmate of the Laszinskis' household. Heaven knows what fictions Massimo had invented to meet all the inquiries of the high-born lady, who certainly would not have taken so young and pretty a girl into her house on his sole recommendation. But the young man brought in the name of his mother, the Princess (who, it is needless to say, was not aware of Marie's existence!), and he finally carried his point. For a time all went well. Marie won high approbation in her employment, and was invited to accompany her pupils into the country for a few weeks.

Then the end came. Evelina fled from her husband's house with the Roman Prince, and Marie was turned out of her new home with contumely as soon as the news reached it. Alone in the world, almost

heart-broken for the loss of her sister whom she loved devotedly, her means of earning a livelihood suddenly cut off, Marie was utterly desolate. She knew not even where her sister was; and the thought that Evelina had forsaken her was the sharpest and most intolerable grief of all. But Evelina had neither forsaken nor forgotten her. She wrote to her from Paris a letter full of passionate affection, imploring her to come thither, and enclosing a sum of money. The letter was addressed to Marie at her employer's house, which it reached after her dismissal, and by that noble lady was indignantly sent to Laszinski's address. Laszinski coolly opened it, extracted the French bank notes, and burnt the letter.

At this time Marie, who had taken a poor lodging in a suburb of Vienna, and had got, through an old acquaintance at the theatre, some miserably-paid work to do in copying music, met, accidentally as she thought, August von Hartstein. The fact was he had watched and followed her for weeks. To his prayer to be allowed to serve her, Marie answered, "Find my sister." And although it was a task distasteful to him for more than one reason, he performed it faithfully. It was not difficult to learn the whereabouts of Massimiliano. The Duke of Pontalto was living in Paris with his beautiful Polish mistress. The sisters communicated with each other by letter, and all was explained. No doubt Laszinski had stolen Nina's money and suppressed her letter, said Von Hartstein. He was capable of that, and more.

"I should not have accepted the money," said Marie. "But it is everything to me to know that Evelina had not utterly forgotten me."

Then Von Hartstein asked her to be his wife. Deeply sensible of the generosity, and even nobility, of the offer made at such a moment, Marie at first refused. She would not bring sorrow and disgrace on him. "For it would be disgrace in the eyes of the world," she said. "Although I know Evelina, and what her

life was with that man, and her fine nature, the world does not know—or care."

"But Von Hartstein was resolute, and he prevailed. As to disgrace, he would take her away to his Northern home, where her name and story were unknown; and, for the rest, he should be able to make his wife respected. He loved her with a manful love, and he won her. Evelina received the news with passionate tears of joy and sorrow, and regret and hope, and a hundred mingled feelings. Marie was safe. Marie would be cared for and happy. That was much; that was all! And yet in her heart she knew that they must henceforth be apart.

For little more than a year she and Massimo remained together, travelling all over Europe. But at length, on their return to Paris, where they had a *pied-à-terre*, he found a letter summoning him back to Rome, in consequence of the death of his father. He parted from Nina with vows of fervid love and unchanging constancy. And within six months he was married to Donna Livia San Gemignano, the bride having been selected for him by his deceased father (who had urged his wife to hurry on the marriage), and the alliance having been arranged between the heads of the two families in the orthodox fashion befitting such high contracting parties.

Nina did not rave, or kill herself, or commit any wild or desperate action. She shut herself up alone for some days; and whatever floods of sorrow, and bitterness, and disappointment, and unavailing regrets passed over her soul, she struggled through alone. During those days she took certain resolutions which she kept, if not perfectly, yet with more strength and constancy than is given to most mortals. One of these resolutions was never to complain.

In those days Laszinski, who had been arrested and imprisoned for swindling, sought out his wife after his release from jail, and required her to furnish him with money. Within the past twelvemonth he had sunk

by an inevitable law of gravitation into still lower depths of scoundrelism, and had added brandy to his other vices. Massimo had left Nina amply provided with means, which, however, she had made up her mind to refuse. And when she told Laszinski that she could not assist him, he threw off the last remnant of reticence, and announced his intention of applying himself to Prince Nasoni. Then, indeed, Nina lost courage for the moment, and was crushed by shame and misery. Arguments, sarcasms, tears, or anger, would equally, as she knew, have been thrown away on Laszinski. He wanted money, and money alone would quiet him. She gave him what she had in the house, and promised him more for the next day. And when he had taken away his shabby, greasy, smoke-saturated, ruffianly presence from her sight, she sat down and cried tremblingly, like a bewildered, frightened child. Thus Beppe Guarini chanced to find her. He had been an acquaintance of her father in the old Bohemian days in Paris. An exile, he, also, for political reasons, the Polish family had received him as a comrade. And Nina, in her weakness and terror of Laszinski—in her horror at the glimpse of hideous abysses to which he might yet have power to drag her down with him, told Guarini all.

From that day forth her lot had been linked with his. He protected her against Laszinski's drunken violence. He behaved to her with consistent kindness and respect. He did, in truth, respect her. He thought her the cleverest woman he had ever known. Her intelligence was useful to him in his adventurous existence in a thousand ways, and he always owned it.

After a career embracing nearly every crime in the calendar, Laszinski took service as a spy in the pay of the Russian Government; and at length tidings reached Guarini that he had been shot by the authorities of some Turkish village, and this planet relieved of his existence. By this time Guarini was able to return to his own country. The great fact of Italian unity had

been completed and crowned by the possession of Rome. Guarini asked Casimir Laszinski's widow to be his wife, and esteemed himself fortunate when she said "yes." Nina had singular notions, and he had by no means felt sure that she would consent to bind herself again by a legal tie. But Nina said to him: "You and my father are the only two faithful men I have ever known. I will be a true wife to you. Thank God, I have always told you the truth! It must be terrible to deceive those who trust you!"

Of this story of her youth, and of many other incidents connected with it, Nina Guarini was thinking, as she drove home from the Palazzo Nasoni in the dark winter evening.

CHAPTER XV.

To a being who should contemplate our planet from the moon, it is probable that small difference would be observable, not only between the various European countries, but between the great divisions of the globe. It would be much if masses of land and water could be distinguished from each other with the aid of the most powerful lunar telescope. And to the philosopher beholding mankind from a parallel elevation of mind, no doubt, Rome and Dozebury, with their respective inhabitants, would present very similar outlines, and would perhaps seem identical in their main features. But to the humble observer close to the soil a thousand singular differences and contrasts manifest themselves. "Behold!" says the philosopher, "those swarming specks, moving and jostling, hasting and resting. They are but emmets. Whether they dwell in a stubble field, or a garden patch, or a dusty wayside, or a human habitation, they are still but ephemeral insects. All is vanity! These creatures are produced,

and reproduce others, and die in precisely the same fashion. A seed corn more or less is of no consequence in the vast scheme of creation." To which the humble observer aforesaid, very close to the soil, might modestly reply that, though the seed corn more or less may be of no consequence to creation in general, it makes all the difference to the emmets!

But, to descend from the moon, it must distinctly be stated that the village of Dozebury was extremely unlike the city of Rome in the eyes of ordinary mortals. It was not a picturesque, Arcadian-looking village. The fronts of most of the houses, and of all the shops, had been modernized. Irregular gables had been abolished or disguised, brass plates and bell-handles substituted for wrought-iron knockers and massive locks on the doors, and large squares of clear glass for lozenge-shaped panes in the windows. Here and there a bit of carved stonework had been choked up with stucco, and oaken beams, black with age, had been hidden beneath a coat of whitewash. The landlord of the Salutation Inn had long ago removed a quaint, weather-stained signboard, representing two *beaux* of the reign of Queen Anne bowing to each other, with their hats in their hands and their swords sticking out at right angles to their bodies, and had substituted for it the words "Salutation Hotel" in gilt Roman letters two feet high, all along the front of his house. But then, to be sure, the bowing *beaux* had been innovations themselves once upon a time, and had superseded a far more ancient painting, representing the salutation of St. Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary

All the inhabitants of the village looked on these things as improvements; and many of them had carried on analogous processes within-doors. Mr. Joshua Higgins, for instance, had in his house a room lined with finely-carved wood-work. It was said, indeed, to have been wrought by no less a hand than that of Grinling Gibbons. But Mr. Higgins disliking, as he said, the old-fashioned look of the time-darkened panels,

had caused them to be thickly painted of a rich cream colour, picked out with bright blue. And all the public opinion on this proceeding which ever made itself manifest to Mr. Higgins, was warmly favourable to it. The only edifice in Dozebury which preserved anything of its aspect of rightful antiquity was the church. Nay, even this had a sort of new-old air, so to speak; for it had not escaped the general deluge of whitewash which overwhelmed architecture during the eighteenth century. And it had only recently been scraped and restored into something like proper archæological form by the zeal of the absentee Rector, who lived abroad for his health, but endeavoured to make amends to his flock by his liberality in the matter of brasses and painted windows.

By virtue of these archæological restorations, indeed, St. Mary's had come to be known as a show church throughout the neighbourhood. Kitty Low, granddaughter of Mrs. Fox, the late parish clerk's widow, who kept the keys, received many a shilling from visitors who came to view the brasses and the carved tombstones with recumbent knights and worthies,—noseless for the most part, but placidly indifferent to their loss,—and the brand-new stained-glass windows. These were not, to be sure, so richly mellow in colour as the ancient ones, but then they successfully simulated antiquity in respect of drawing, anatomy, and perspective; our forefathers' ignorance being, unfortunately, more imitable than their skill.

But though the inhabitants were blind to the picturesque, and had reduced their dwellings as far as possible to a dead level of vulgar uniformity, yet there were pleasant sights to be seen in Dozebury, even from an artistic point of view. The neighbourhood was remarkably pretty, with gently rising slopes and softly nestling hollows; covered with rich gardens and orchards, and celebrated for the size and growth of its trees. Here and there, straggling beyond the street (it had but one) of Dozebury proper, might be found

a labourer's cottage, with a thatched roof rich with lichens, and its lattice windows blinking out of a bush of climbing roses; or further away still, a farm-house, many-gabled, with white pigeons wheeling round its gilded vane.

The churchyard of St. Mary's would have delighted an eye able to enjoy the idyllic beauties of a peculiarly English scene. It sloped down from the church to a little stream that came purling through green meadows. Its turf, whose velvet pile had taken near three centuries to weave, covered the undulating graves with a mantle soft as sleep. A black, aged yew-tree stood near the church porch, and from the shelter of its shadow you could look far and wide on a sunny day across a dappled landscape bounded by blue woodlands on a distant ridge.

But when Violet Moore beheld her native Dozebury once more after her absence in foreign parts, it was not under its pleasantest aspect. A cold steady rain poured perseveringly from a low sky of dull, unbroken grey. The gargoyles of St. Mary's sent down foaming cataracts on to the flagged paths round the church; every leaden spout in Dozebury gave forth lavish contributions to the turbid waters that foamed along the gutters in the street. The ground around the railway station, half-a-mile away, was poached into a miry slough. Passengers darted desperately under dripping umbrellas across the open line to the shed on the "up" side or the "down" side, as the case might be; the one porter, with his velveteen trousers tucked up above his boots, tramped with dogged indifference through the puddles, as who should say, "*I* know my weather by heart; as well be wet through first as last." The Dozebury omnibus — a stunted vehicle, like an omnibus begun by a person of liberal ideas as to the public good, and broken off short in the middle by his heirs and assigns—had rivulets of rain meandering all over the tarpaulin on its roof, and dribbling down inside by chinks in the window-panes over the fusty red velvet seats.

Miss Baines and her niece, arriving at Dozebury by the three o'clock express from London, found no more friendly face to greet them at the station than the shining red visage of the omnibus driver, a servant in the employ of the landlord of the Salutation Inn, who was proprietor of the vehicle. Shivering, sick, and weary—for they had arrived early that morning in town from the Continent—the two women mounted into the omnibus, on to the roof of which their luggage was subsequently hoisted with a series of bumps and shocks which made their teeth chatter, and were driven away, plashing and floundering, through a long miry lane to the mansion of Mr. Joshua Higgins.

Miss Baines lived in a little cottage of her own near to her uncle's house; and Violet had always shared her aunt's home. But by Mr. Higgins's express request the travellers were to alight at his house, and spend some time as his guests before returning to Woodbine Cottage, as Miss Baines had christened her dwelling. Betsy Baines considered this invitation as a very favourable symptom of Uncle Joshua's mood. He had condescended to say in his letter on the subject that he thought his house would be more comfortable for them on first arriving than Woodbine Cottage, which had been shut up, and where things were not in readiness to receive them. And this mark of his consideration was very comforting to his niece. And had it not been for the secret of Violet's engagement, which weighed upon her rather heavily, she would have been very cheerful and pleased to get back to Dozebury in spite of the rain and the cold. Violet, on the contrary, was thoroughly dispirited. She sat wrapped in her travelling cloak, looking through the window dim with rain and the mist of her own breath, at a phantasmagoric procession of bare hedge-rows and barred gates with here and there a tall leafless tree, which seemed to flit past the vehicle, shown against a low cold grey background of clouds, that looked like the steam from a gigantic cauldron. She was thinking of her last

parting from Mario on a bright afternoon, when the tall fountain in the wide piazza near the Roman railway station had thrown up a column of silver waters, glittering in the sunshine, and the air was full of the smell of violets. She was thinking of the smile on that bronzed face, and the tender look in those dark eyes, and the musical tones of that pleasant voice assuring her of fervent love and unchanging constancy, which were sweeter to her than the violets, brighter than the sunshine. But all the while she was conscious of the chill wet landscape, and the fusty red velvet cushions, and the rain dripping down the window pane on to the seat beside her.

At length the omnibus pulled up in front of Mr. Higgins's house. It was a solid, square, old, stone house that had once stood alone in spacious grounds. It was now in Dozebury High Street, from which it was divided by a little railed garden, with a bright yellow gravel path leading straight to the front door in the centre of the house. Behind it was a flagged yard, approached from a side lane, with stables and offices; and behind the yard again a large kitchen garden surrounded by an ancient brick wall. The iron gate of the front garden stood open; and when the omnibus stopped a middle-aged woman servant, holding an umbrella in one hand, and with the other lifting her skirts out of the wet, and displaying the neatest of shoes and white stockings, came down the path from the house to bid the travellers welcome. "Master" was not at home, this woman explained, but would return at five o'clock. Meanwhile the ladies would find a good fire, and some food, and some hot tea ready for them. And James Rawlinson would help the omnibus man to carry in their luggage. James Rawlinson, a functionary dressed like a groom, and with a cowskin cap on his head, advanced. In response to Miss Baines's kindly "How do you do, James? I'm glad to see you still here," he answered, "Oh ah; I'm still yere," with so glum a visage that

a stranger would have supposed something unusual had happened to put him out of temper. But his surly manner was due to no special circumstance—unless, indeed, it might be the circumstance of having been greeted with a smile. James, in fact, like a good many of his compeers, always received a courtesy in the same spirit with which a hackney coachman receives double his fare—with a feeling, that is to say, that the courteous one is a fool, and that more might have been got out of him by judicious bullying.

"Well, it *is* nice to be at home again, isn't it, Violet?" said Miss Baines, when, refreshed by the hot tea and a well-cooked repast, she sate beside a glowing coal fire in the square parlour.

"Uncle Joshua's house never seems like home to me," answered Violet. "I would rather have gone to the Cottage."

"Oh, but it was very kind and thoughtful of Uncle Joshua to ask us here first."

"I dare say he meant it kindly."

"Of course he did. But when I speak of being at home again, I mean England generally. I must say it is a comfort to get away from the foreign ways and the foreign voices for a bit. Just look at those bright fire-irons! Did you ever see such fire-irons on the Continent? No, no, my dear. Every land has its own blessings, no doubt; but as to housemaid's work, I should say they haven't an idea of it abroad. And the way that dish of chops was served, Violet!—brown and hot, and done to a turn. Mutton again, in the true sense of the word—and, at all events, considered in the form of chops—I look on as quite peculiar to our native land. Ah, we have much to be thankful for, my dear!"

Violet gazed out of the window through a mist of tears. Her aunt's insistance on all these prosaic little details irritated her nerves, and not the less so that she felt Miss Baines was justified in enjoying the solid comfort, the unpretending abundance, the exquisite

cleanliness—so thorough and exquisite as to constitute almost an element of moral refinement—of that English household. Violet was by no means insensible to the value of warmth, neatness, tranquillity, order—and even well-cooked mutton chops. But all these things, so good in themselves, accentuated the distance and the difference between the life she had left and the life she had returned to. How should she hope to persuade people accustomed to the latter, of the yearning regret with which her thoughts turned southward? Everything that surrounded her in her uncle's house seemed to be a standing, stubborn protest against the imprudence and folly of binding herself to a foreigner, and exiling herself into poverty in a foreign land. Italy seemed further away, Mario more completely separated from her, than she had yet been conscious of.

"And, really, I must say," continued Miss Baines, unaware of the reason why Violet kept her head turned away, and not seeing the furtive movement of the girl's hand to her eyes, "I must say that Martha keeps the house most beautifully. She has only a housemaid under her, and James Rawlinson for the knives and boots. But what do you think she told me when I was washing my hands just now? Why, that Uncle Joshua is thinking of taking a new parlour-maid! Martha thinks it is on account of having us to stay in the house, which, of course, will give extra work. But, if so, I can't help fancying that Uncle Joshua must mean to have us—or at least one of us—for a permanency. Because otherwise another servant would not be worth while. And, if so, I'm sure it shows that he is actuated by great kind feeling, Violet. He is getting an old man, and may wish to have his own kith and kin about him. Nothing more natural! And I *hope* you will be kind and affectionate to him, Violet."

Thus Miss Baines rambled on, in a soft monotone, with her feet on the fender, and her gown folded back on her knee, so as not to be scorched by the

fire. And Violet's spirits sank lower and lower. Rome was so far away—so far away! And the life and the love there seemed to have passed away like a dream, except from her own heart. Her aunt talked as if she had forgotten! And the dusk gathered, and the rain fell, and there was not a sound to be heard throughout the quiet house.

Presently, when it was nearly dark, and Miss Baines had fallen into a doze, a heavy step was heard advancing along the passage, and a hand threw open the door, not roughly, but with authoritative decision, and a voice said, "Well, so here you are. I reckoned you might ha' been home yesterday if you'd looked a bit sharp, and come straight through. However, I s'pose you're but poor creatures in the way of travelling; and better late than never."

Uncle Joshua's entrance was followed by the entrance of a lamp, and by its light he proceeded to have what he called "a good look" at his nieces. He was a tall, bulky old man, with a broad red face, small light-grey eyes, a mouth like a straight horizontal slit, and a thick fringe of white whiskers, edging cheeks and chin. He was dressed in black, with a limp white neckcloth, which gave him somewhat the look of a Dissenting preacher; but his voice and his manner were mundane enough. He spoke with a slight rustic accent—which, however, it was in his power to modify when it pleased him—and a bawling tone, as though his hearers were either a long way off, or so dull as to require to have their intelligence forcibly stimulated.

"Well," said he again when he had shaken hands with them both and stared at them hard, "so here you are. I'm only just got back from Charnham corn-market."

"I'm afraid you must have got wet, Uncle Joshua," said Miss Baines with her habitual consideration for his comfort and welfare.

"Why you don't suppose I walked back from Charnham, do you?"

"No; oh, of course not. But I mean—if you were in the gig—rain is so very penetrating——"

"Well, we don't have dry rain in these parts certainly. Maybe they do where you've been, eh? Ha, ha! Oh Betsy, you haven't gained much gumption, as far as I can see. However, I wasn't in the gig. I took the 'bus—Benson's 'bus of the 'Salutation.' And anyhow I ain't made of sugar nor salt. A few drops of rain won't kill me. I'm pretty tough yet, Betsy."

"I think you're looking wonderfully well, Uncle Joshua."

"I am well: sound as a roach. Can't return the compliment though to either of you two," answered Mr. Higgins with much complacency. Truly, both the women looked pale and weary; and Mr. Higgins felt this as a gratifying testimony to his own wisdom in staying at home. He proceeded to inquire if they had had something to eat, and whether Martha had used them well; and was still further gratified by Miss Baines's hearty praises of the meal, which he interrupted by such comments as "Ah, you don't get mutton like that among the foreigners. 'Spose you was hungry half the time with nothing but their messes. Tea? Pish! you ought to have taken a good glass of bitter beer with your meal. Wholesomest drink in the world. Talk of their cheap wines! Lord, I tasted some, at a shilling a bottle, over at the 'Blue Boar' in Charnham. *I* know what it is. I was obliged to toss off sixpenn'orth o' brandy neat, or I b'lieve I should have had a fit of the colic. And I've a pretty good stomach, too. I ain't squeamish."

In a word, Mr. Higgins was so elated by the contrast which he conjured up between his own daily fare and the wretched viands to which his nieces had been condemned during the past twelvemonth, that he became good-humoured and kindly, and bade Martha, when she came in with the supper tray, to take care of Miss Elizabeth, and see that she had a good fire in her bed-room.

Just before they separated for the night, he said, "I'll give you three guesses as to who I've seen to-day in Charnham. Some one who knows you both—knew you abroad. A great admirer of Miss Pussy here. Oh, you needn't colour up, and look so scared. It's a lady; I'll tell you that much. Can you guess?"

Violet looked at him in bewilderment. The only person she could think of answering to her uncle's description was Nina Guarini. Surely it was not possible that Nina, whom she had parted from the other day in Rome, should now be within a few miles of her! Miss Baines, whose mind was not so exclusively occupied with the persons connected with Captain Masi, exclaimed, after a pause, "Can it be Mrs. Lucas? She spoke of having friends in our neighbourhood."

"Mrs. Lucas it is, Betsy. A most sooperior woman. Highly so. A woman I can take pleasure in talking to —and that's saying a good deal."

"Yes; she has a great deal of information. At least, she has seen a great deal of the world. And she writes in very choice language."

"You're right, Betsy. At least, about her writing I don't know. But she's a sooperior sort of a woman. And, I'll tell you what: we'll have her over here to see you and Violet. So long as you partake the hospitality of my roof, I shall make your friends welcome—when they're friends I approve."

CHAPTER XVI.

It takes time and experience to convince youth of how little consequence any individual is to the rest in this busy world. Even the least egotistic persons are enormously important to themselves; and it is hard at first to realize that our pains and pleasures, and loves

and hates, and hopes and fears, frequently pass unperceived by our fellow-creatures; and that they may even be perceived without arousing any keen interest. A little child never does realize it, but comes to us with its joys and woes, in the touching confidence that what is so vivid to it, must perforce move others. Violet Moore was not a little child, and, moreover, she had sufficient native shrewdness to read her Uncle Joshua's character pretty accurately. And yet, for days after her return to Dozebury, she could not overcome a sense of surprise and blank disappointment at finding the old man so curiously uninterested in all that did not touch his daily life, its business, or its comforts—so curiously uninterested in *her!* He scarcely ever questioned her as to her foreign travels, appearing to think that he knew already all that was worth knowing about the Continent. Still less did he seem to desire any account of her views and feelings. He talked of the affairs and the inhabitants of Dozebury and Charnham as though they constituted the topics most important to the human race. And it did not occur to Violet that Uncle Joshua would, in his turn, have been profoundly surprised could he have guessed the weary, soul-sick indifference with which she listened to the details that so interested him.

Violet's only comfort was in writing to Mario. She indited long and frequent letters to him, and waited with impatience the first day when it should be possible to hear from him. But nearly a week passed after the date on which his letter might have reached her, and none had come. Her aunt philosophically bade her not fidget and fret. Captain Masi was, of course, very busy bringing out the new journal. It was likely he had not a moment to himself to write letters. One would come all in good time. And Violet did not resent being told that she was foolishly anxious and impatient; for, if her impatience were justified, Mario must be blamed. And at length a letter did come. And Violet read it over and over

again, and went about with it hidden next her heart, and smiled and flushed, and was transfigured as if she had swallowed some magic elixir of beauty. Mario had, indeed, been busy, it seemed, working with extraordinary energy and industry. He had even on several occasions sat up all night, chained to his desk, and overwhelmed with business and responsibility. But he gave a good account of the success of the new journal, which was entitled *The Tribune of the People*—success, at least, so far as regarded its colleagues of the Press. Of course, as to its paying, it was too early to talk about that. They had a fair list of subscribers, and received warm praises for the brightness and talent of the leading articles, which were written chiefly by Mario. Violet, who trusted implicitly, not only his truthfulness, but his judgment, was charmed by this news. But the sense of living in her uncle's house on false pretences, as it were, and keeping her engagement secret from him, weighed on her spirits and hurt her self-respect.

Meanwhile, she tried to qualify herself for being a helpmate to a poor man, by learning something of cooking and other household matters, of which she was very ignorant. Aunt Betsy and her two maid-servants had always managed their modest home. And to Aunt Betsy, as to most of her contemporaries of the same class, it seemed natural and fitting that a "young lady's" education should embrace no practically useful knowledge whatever. It was not easy to acquire the skill she wanted in Uncle Joshua's house. Martha not only reigned but governed in the kitchen, and resented the presence there of interlopers. But Violet got some assistance from an old Dozebury acquaintance of hers—Kitty Low, of whom mention has already been made as keeping the keys of the church.

Kitty Low was a prim-looking, flat-chested spinster of eight-and-twenty, with smooth flaxen hair, and eyebrows and eyelashes of a lighter shade, and a long upper lip, which she shut tightly over the under lip after speaking, as though it were moved by an india-

rubber spring. Long ago Violet had been rather attracted to Kitty Low, who was not generally popular, by a certain originality of mind which belonged to her. It was curious to see this originality struggling against the bonds of a narrow education and the thousand petty prejudices common to her class and condition. It did not always struggle successfully, but it was never wholly lulled to sleep by the poppy and mandragora of a provincial parish. Kitty lived with her grandmother, Mrs. Fox, whose deceased husband had been clerk inside the church, and general factotum to the Rector outside it, for forty years. She lived in a tiny house at one extremity of Dozebury, near to the gates of the churchyard, and from her windows she could see whatever passed in Dozebury High Street. That was little enough, to be sure. But Mrs. Fox, who had fallen and broken her leg some five years ago, and had limped so badly ever since as to be scarcely capable of hobbling from her parlour to the little bed-chamber behind it, went nigh to considering the topography of Dozebury as a providential arrangement, designed mainly for the purpose of affording her a little amusement. "I could have had Benson's cottage for thirty shillings a year less," she was accustomed to say. "But what outlook is there from Benson's cottage? Now here, being right square to the street and near to the 'Salutation,' I can see everything as goes by, and the 'bus come in from the station and everything. My window is a special mercy, as I always say. And the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, for if I had my legs like Mrs. Sykes I shouldn't care so much for a view."

She and her granddaughter lived in peace together, for Kitty was very dutiful in deeds, but they occasionally differed considerably in conversation. Kitty had a logical mind and an uncompromising spirit, and the result of that combination was frequently unpleasant to talkers who loved large generalizations, and had no narrow prejudice against a *non sequitur*. Mrs.

Fox was wont to express the impression produced on her by Kitty's severe deductions by saying that she was a 'cute wench, but that obstinate as you could never reason with her.

Violet resumed her acquaintance with Kitty, and took the habit of dropping in at Mrs. Fox's cottage very frequently. It was a model of neatness and good order, and both the old woman and her granddaughter were notable housewives; and, moreover, Mrs. Fox in her youth had been a cook in gentlemen's families. Violet confided to Kitty Low that she desired to be able to do something a little more useful in the world than making crochet hoods or embroidering sofa-cushions. And Kitty, being rather original herself, sympathized with this extraordinary wish. Cooking classes and lectures on domestic economy had not penetrated to Dozebury, nor even to Charnham. But Kitty Low said that Miss Moore was welcome to learn what she could teach her, from ironing and clear-starching to the preparation of plain roast and boiled and a pudding.

One trait which attracted, or at least interested, Violet in this young woman was the courage, cold and keen as a steel blade, with which she faced her own future as a poor and solitary old maid. Violet's warm, youthful imagination used to shudder at the clear, icy view which Kitty took of her life. The pitiless rigour of her common sense was appalling, but it was interesting too, at least to Violet. She had never met with anything like it. She had known persons who told disagreeable truths about their neighbours, but they seldom carried their remorseless impartiality any further. Kitty Low was different.

"No, no, Miss Moore," she would say, in her subdued, monotonous, but rather sweet voice. "When you're a lady with plenty of money it may be better. But it can't be a pleasant lot anyway to be elderly, and sickly, and single. Them as says different are only trying to deceive you or themselves."

"But why should you be elderly, and sickly, and single? What's the use of making up your mind beforehand to such disagreeable things?"

"It isn't that I make up my mind, Miss Moore, any more than you make up your mind to see Dozebury High Street when you look out of window. You might like a beautifuller prospect, but Dozebury High Street is there, so you see that."

"But, goodness me, Kitty! what's to prevent your getting married? You're not so very old."

"No, it isn't my years altogether; but I have no attractions, you see."

"Yes, you have. I think you're quite nice-looking."

"Men don't think so. And that's what's mainly wanted."

"But why shouldn't they think so?" cried Violet, impatiently.

"God has made 'em so, Miss Moore," answered Kitty, with perfect calmness and gravity. After which there was a pause of some duration.

"Well," said Violet, at length, "you need not be sickly, even if you are single."

"I haven't much constitution. I'm hollow-chested and just the kind of woman to be peaking and pining without regularly breaking down, when I get a little into years."

Violet looked at her curiously. "You never complain," she said. "You always seem contented. I wonder how you can, if you really think all this."

"There's something to look to beyond," replied Kitty. "Not that I'm one of them as think we shall all find it just what we could wish, even in the new life—not quite at first, at any rate. It'll be good for us, no doubt. That we're bound to believe. But, I can't fancy it'll be all junketing. And there are 'many mansions,' you know, Miss Moore. Some of us will have to come off second best, it stands to reason."

Kitty's observations on her fellow-creatures were

equally characterized by independence of judgment, but she rarely confided them to any one's ears. With Violet, however, she would occasionally be communicative. The sort of intimacy which grew up between these two rather surprised Miss Baines, who could not see what there was in Kitty Low to distinguish her from other young women of her class, unless it might be an unusual degree of silence.

In accordance with the intention he had announced on the night of their arrival, Uncle Joshua invited Mrs. Lucas on a visit to his house. That "sooperior woman" was staying with some relatives of her late husband at Charnham, and accepted Mr. Higgins's invitation with flattering eagerness. She wrote also a little note to "her dearest Miss Baines," wherein she set forth that she looked with rapture to the moment when she should again press her dear and valued friend to her heart, and congratulated her on her safe return to that happy land which in the words of the poet ruled the main, and to the enjoyment of Mr. Joshua Higgins's improving conversation and elegant hospitality.

"I'm sure I never thought Mrs. Lucas was so much attached to me," said Miss Baines, simply. "We were not very intimate."

Violet said nothing. She had no very kindly feeling towards Mrs. Lucas, remembering her words against the Guarinis. And Miss Violet was capable of considerable resentment, especially on behalf of her friends. But it appeared that she was destined, rather than her aunt, to do the honours of Mr. Higgins's house to Mrs. Lucas. Uncle Joshua curtly informed his niece Betsy, after she had been at Dozebury about a fortnight, that it would be convenient to him if she would now repair to her own cottage, which by this time had been put in order. "Not," said Mr. Higgins, "that I mean to grudge you your rations, Elizabeth Baines. You can come and take your meals here, and welcome, and have James Rawlinson with the lantern to convey you home o' nights, though it isn't fifty yards to go for that

matter. But your bed-room will be wanted for your friend, Mrs. Lucas. It's the best in the house after my own, and I mean her to have it. Violet will remain here. Mrs. Lucas is very partic'lar in her conduct, and she told me she could not possibly stay in my house unless there was some female of the family to make things proper; and I approved of it—highly so. My own principles have allus been strict."

Violet did not relish the task assigned to her. She would have preferred to go and stay peacefully in Woodbine Cottage, but she could not have her own way. And one afternoon the nondescript vehicle with a hood to it, which Mr. Higgins called the "pheayton," was despatched to the station, and returned bearing Mrs. Lucas and as much of her luggage as could be contained in it. The rest was to come on the omnibus. There sat Mrs. Lucas, surrounded by a heterogeneous collection of packages, comprising three bandboxes; and as the vehicle approached Mr. Higgins's door, she kissed her hand enthusiastically to Miss Baines and Violet at the parlour window. She was a stout and good-looking woman of about five-and-forty, with hair that was still black and glossy, bright dark eyes, and rosy, round cheeks. In her youth she had been pale, slender, and sentimental. The pallor and slenderness had disappeared long ago, but Mrs. Lucas had not modified her manner so as to bring it more into harmony with her present appearance, which would best have been described by the word "jolly." Mr. Higgins was at home to receive his guest, and went to the garden gate to conduct her into the house.

"Oh, Mr. Higgins," said she, as she walked up the path on his arm, "you have overwhelmed me with attentions and kindness! When I saw your equipage at the station I could scarcely credit that you had taken all that trouble for poor little me!"

Mr. Higgins understood that the portly lady on his

arm was not alluding to her physical dimensions, but intended to express a modest diffidence as to her claims on his consideration; and he made answer condescendingly, "Why not, ma'am? Why not? There's none more worthy to be taken notice of than yourself!"

CHAPTER XVII.

ALTHOUGH the distance was short from Mr. Higgins's garden gate to his dining parlour, Mrs. Lucas's progress thither was long. She stopped on her way to admire the front of the house, the shrubs before the windows, the garden beds with their box borders, and—a little further on—the entrance hall, with a mahogany hat-stand and eight-day clock, and the pattern of the carpet on the stairs which led up from it. It might have been supposed, to hear her, that Mrs. Lucas had just arrived from a prolonged residence in a wigwam, or a Tartar tent. At length, however, she reached the dining-room, where Miss Baines and Violet were awaiting her, and she embraced them both with extraordinary demonstrations of affection. "Who would have thought that we should meet again thus?" she exclaimed. "Who could have guessed that I should be privileged to see you both beneath this venerated roof? Who could have imagined such a piece of good fortune for me?" And she went on in this strain so long, that Violet, losing patience, observed that any one might have thought, guessed, or imagined it, who happened to know, as they all did, that Mrs. Lucas had friends at Charnham, and was frequently in the neighbourhood. But Mrs. Lucas's grateful and admiring mood continued with undiminished intensity.

After the early dinner they all sat round the fire. It was Mr. Higgins's custom to smoke a pipe at this

period of the day. "I hope you don't mind tobacco, Mrs. Lucas," said the host, filling his pipe. "Because, if you do, it'll deprive me of the pleasure of your company."

"Oh, my dear sir, pray don't think of such a thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Lucas, almost squeaking in her emphasis. "I adore tobacco. But even if I did not, I would not for worlds have you driven from your own hearth——"

"Me? Oh, no! I never smoke my pipe anywhere else. But there's a little sitting-room at the back, where you could withdraw if you liked. You could have a fire."

"Ever considerate," murmured Mrs. Lucas. But she protested once more that the smell of tobacco was, above all other odours, delicious in her nostrils.

Presently she began to chat with Miss Baines and Violet about Italy. "And what," said she in a mysterious tone, "was the result of my communication respecting the G.s?"

Miss Baines glanced uneasily at her uncle. But Violet answered at once and without hesitation. "If you mean that gossip which was told you about the Guarinis, it had no result at all. Except," she added after a moment's pause, "to make us feel sorry that your friend should not have been more careful before spreading scandal about persons whom he did not know."

"Oh, dear!" cried Mrs. Lucas, clasping her hands.

"Hulloa!" said Mr. Higgins. "What is it all about, hey?"

"It was some friends—at least acquaintances they were at first—but we had excellent references—I don't mean references, but information, information about them," began Miss Baines, in hurried, embarrassed accents.

Mr. Higgins cut her short. "What are you cackling about, Betsy Baines?" said he. "I can't make head or tail of it! You always were muddle-headed, and

ou haven't improved by going on the Continent." This was a favourite sarcasm of Mr. Higgins's, as hough his niece had gone abroad in the expectation of eing morally and physically regenerated. If she had ad a wooden leg when she left England, he would robably have taunted her with still needing it on her eturn.) Then he went on: "Violet, perhaps you can xplain what your aunt means."

"Yes, Uncle Joshua, I can," answered the girl, aising her head, and looking straight at him.

"Well said, my lass! You speak so as one can nderstand you."

Violet began the history of her acquaintance with Madame Guarini from the time when they first met in Swiss hotel, and carried it on to the day of her departure from Rome. It was a chronicle of disinterested indness on Nina's part towards two strangers. "The erson Mrs. Lucas alludes to," said Violet, in conclusion, "picked up a quantity of scandalous gossip about hese good friends of ours; and Mrs. Lucas—meaning ell, no doubt—wrote it all to Aunt Betsy, warning er not to continue the acquaintance."

"I'm sure I acted for the best," said Mrs. Lucas, umbly.

"Not a doubt of it, ma'am," said Mr. Higgins.

"Of course I felt it right to let dear Miss Baines now what I had gleaned, so to speak, in moments of onfidential converse, and to put her on her guard."

"Of course."

"You know what foreigners are, Mr. Higgins——"

"Certainly, ma'am. A man don't live to my time f life without knowing that!"

"And female propriety is—if I may so express yself—such a sensitive blossom."

"You're quite right, Mrs. Lucas. My own principles ave ever been strict, and I have required the same om all my family."

"But really, you know, Mrs. Lucas," put in Miss Baines, "many members of the aristocracy used to go

to Madame Guarini's parties. There was the Duke of Pontalto and——"

"A Dook was there?" said Mr. Higgins. "Ah, but all foreigners have titles! It's very different from what it is with us."

Nevertheless, the mention of the Duke was not without its effect. The subject dropped for the time, but Mrs. Lucas subsequently recurred to it more than once when she was alone with Miss Baines. And she even said: "If we are ever in Rome together again, I think I shall get you to introduce me to the Signora. I adore literary and poetical society. And I fancy that would be just the sort of circle I should like."

Mrs. Lucas had an excellent temper, of the kind that results from moral and mental bluntness of perception. Moreover she was rather silly than spiteful, and did not desire maliciously to injure any one. But hers was one of those characters which never quite outgrow the stage of playing at most things in life; and if you took her too seriously she was apt to be disconcerted and resentful. Her illusions did not soar very high. They dealt rather with terrestrial mud-pies than with cloudy castles in the air. But such as they were, she liked to enjoy them after a fashion to which conviction was no more necessary than it is to a child "making believe." She was a flatterer by instinct. But her flatteries were generally uttered more for the purpose of forming a roseate atmosphere around herself than deliberately deceiving her hearers. She liked high-flown words and romantic sentiments; and, above all, she liked to consider herself as an interesting figure, and an object of tender solicitude to the male sex.

Miss Baines having taken up her residence in her own cottage, and Uncle Joshua having his business to attend to, the visitor was thrown mainly on Violet's hands for amusement during several hours of each day. Violet had no intention of giving up her studies in cooking and housewifery in order to devote herself

to Mrs. Lucas. She was learning to be a helpful wife to Mario; and every commonest and simplest action performed with that scope became beautiful and interesting in her eyes. The poor girl thought of little else during her waking hours, and she measured her life by the arrival of the not very frequent letters from her lover, as a wanderer in the desert measures his journey by the stars. Mrs. Lucas accompanied her one day to Mrs. Fox's house, and was thenceforward a welcome visitor there. Mrs. Fox, sitting in her patchwork-covered chair near the window, mightily enjoyed a chat with this stranger. Mrs. Fox had lived in Charnham when a girl, and Mrs. Lucas could talk about Charnham folks. Not that she had much that was new to tell about them. But that made small difference. As a pampered lap-dog will mumble a bare bone, not from vulgar hunger, but *dillettante* gluttony, so Mrs. Fox clung to a savoury morsel of gossip long after she had devoured the solid facts of it; and would repeat and listen to the same words over and over again with intense relish.

"Ah! to be sure," she would say in her deep, full voice, "your husband's step-sister; she married Mr. Johnson, the coach-builder. And her daughter that you speak of, she married William Dixon, the bookseller. And he died of a quinsy, a matter of three or four-and-twenty years ago."

"He did, indeed," said Mrs. Lucas (who had never beheld the deceased Dixon) in a deeply sympathizing tone of voice.

"And a blessed release it was for her; for he drank like a fish," added Mrs. Fox unexpectedly. "And you see how the sins of the fathers are visited on the children; for her grandfather was a hard man, and didn't set his foot inside of a church from one year's end to another."

Then up spoke Kitty Low from the corner, where she had sat silent hitherto, darning a stocking with superior skill and elaboration. "I don't see as that

proves the sins of the fathers being visited on the children. Why should William Dixon behave bad and get drunk if his wife's grandfather didn't go to church? What was it to him?"

"Don't you go agin Scriptur', Kitty," said her grandmother. But at the same time she hastened to avoid a controversy; Kitty being an opponent whom it was not safe to tackle.

It was after one of these interviews that Kitty observed to Miss Moore, "Folks don't understand above one half of what each other says. Haven't you noticed over and over again two people will go on talking for an hour, and neither of 'em a bit nearer to understanding the other's mind at the end of it?"

"Is that why you talk so little, Kitty?" asked Violet, with a smile.

"Partly, I think it is."

"But if we never talked to each other at all we should understand still less."

"I don't feel so sure about that."

"Well, I suppose people like to hear the sound of their own voices. *I* do."

"Why, you generally have something to say when you talk, Miss Moore. And anyway, it comes from you natural, like a bird's song. But our curate, now, Mr. Halliday—sometimes when I listen to him holding forth, I get a feeling as if he wasn't a real man at all, but something wound up like a jack."

"Poor Mr. Halliday! Why, Kitty?"

"Because there's no truth in his talk. I don't mean as he tells lies exactly, but it don't come from his heart. The words of St. Paul are in my mind almost oftener than any others: 'Behold, I show you a mystery.' I had used to puzzle and puzzle about most things until those words got hold of me. And, thinks I at last, 'Well, there's some things as we're not to understand, so it's no good trying.' The Apostle Paul was a learned man, but the most he could do was to *show* us a mystery. He couldn't explain it. And

so it is with some folk's souls. We're bound to believe they have 'em, but it's a mystery. Or else one 'ud think it hardly needs the Almighty should breathe into a man's nostrils the breath of life to make him talk like Mr. Halliday. And you know what we was saying about the new life the other day? Well, now you can't suppose such a person as Mrs. Lucas will be quite comfortable in Heaven all at once—if ever she gets there. She'll miss her old humbug and nonsense sadly at first."

But Mrs. Lucas, all unconscious of Kitty Low's critical attitude of mind, comported herself with great condescension and fascination, and praised Kitty's neatness and dexterity with her needle and in all household matters. "What a firstrate maid you would make, my dear," said Mrs. Lucas to her one day. "A lady's maid, of course, I mean. To a lady, now, travelling alone, you would be invaluable. And to a feeling mind like yours, kind and confidential treatment would be more than lucre."

"I should expect to be treated kind," rejoined Kitty. "But I should require wages too."

That was the beginning of Mrs. Lucas's saying how much she should like to engage Kitty to be her maid, if she went abroad again. Kitty answered that she didn't see her way to take service so long as her grandmother lived, but if she were free from that duty, she did not know but she might be willing to see foreign parts. She had a great thirst for knowledge, and was never weary of hearing all that Violet could tell her of her own not very extensive travels. The description of Rome especially had great attractions for her. "I like to hear you tell about it, Miss Moore," she said, "because you seem to make me see it. Now, Mrs. Lucas, poor lady, if you ask her anything, she can only describe herself, if you know what I mean—what she saw, and what she did, and how she did it. Whereas, you see, we can all make a guess at that, after we've known her five minutes. I asked her about the ocean once, and

how she felt when the ship was in the middle of the great waters, and all I could get out of her was how polite the captain was when she was sick!"

There was, however, one person on whom Mrs. Lucas's manners and conversation made a most favourable impression. Mr. Higgins admired and approved her extremely. He said she had such a just view of the limits of the female mind, and the virtues of the female character. Whether the justness of her views would have aroused in him quite so warm an admiration if she had been sallow, scraggy, or squinting may be doubted. Certain it is that he did not leave out of the catalogue of her merits her buxom figure, bright eyes, and smooth, blooming complexion. Violet did not suspect her uncle of any matrimonial intentions, still less of any tender sentiments. She fell into the common error of youth, taking it for granted that her elders were quite ready to give up certain departments of feeling, and resign themselves to a kind of passive venerability, such as appeared becoming in her twenty-year-old judgment. Miss Baines, being partly banished from the house, had few opportunities of observing the state of the case. But Martha was neither under the disadvantage of inexperience or distance. She was forty years old, and she was on the spot. She made a careful study of Mrs. Lucas, and came to the conclusion that if Mr. Higgins were resolved to bring a new mistress to reign over the household, he might have made a far more disastrous choice than Mrs. Lucas. She was indolent, as Martha had discovered, good-tempered, and very vain. But, although things might have been worse, Martha highly disapproved the idea of her master's marrying again. And if she could have prevented his doing so, she would without scruple. Martha had had her own views and expectations as to a legacy in reward for long and faithful services. If Miss Violet were to be master's heir, all those expectations might be fulfilled. But with a new wife you didn't know what to reckon on. Miss Baines's blindness as to

what was going forward provoked Martha beyond her patience, and she resolved that, if Miss Baines could do nothing to avert the catastrophe, she should at least be made uncomfortable, and not continue to outrage her (Martha's) feelings by a placid unconsciousness. "It's my duty to open her eyes a bit," said Martha, who was not less ingenious than most of us in imputing excellent motives to her own actions.

Accordingly she put on her bonnet one morning and proceeded to Woodbine Cottage, where she was kindly received by Miss Baines, who bade her sit down in the parlour and state her errand. Miss Baines was washing her own special breakfast service of old china: a task she never entrusted to other hands, and with spectacles on nose and a clean fine cloth in her hands, she was performing the operation with great care.

"And how are they all at home, Martha? Pretty well?" said she.

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth. I don't know as there's anything to complain of with their bodily health."

"That's a good hearing," rejoined Miss Baines, intent on her crockery.

"But it's a queer world. Talk of live and learn,—I believe it would take Methusalee to be up to folks."

"Ah! very true, Martha. Would you pour just a leetle more warm water into that basin for me? The kettle is on the hob. Thank you."

"It isn't warm water, but hot water that's a-brewing for some on us, Miss Elizabeth."

"Dear me, Martha! Is anything wrong?" asked Miss Baines. But she was still placid, and intent on her task; expecting at the most the revelation of some insubordination on the part of the kitchen maid, or some manifestation of James Rawlinson's ill-temper.

"Well, wrong is as people may think. Some may fancy it's all right. I don't envy 'em their feelings. I can't, myself, rejoice when I see the orphan despoiled and grey hairs a-making game of themselves, Miss Elizabeth."

"Martha!" exclaimed Miss Baines, pausing with a saucer half-dried in her hand.

"Well, Miss Elizabeth; no more I can't. P'r'aps I speak too free. The lady's your friend of course. And it was through knowing you as she first came to the house; but——"

"Martha!" repeated Miss Baines; but in a fainter voice, and she set down the saucer on the table with a trembling hand. "I beg you will speak out and explain what you mean."

"Why, laws bless us and save us, Miss Elizabeth, do you mean to say as you don't see what's going on? I couldn't have believed it of a lady of your time of life!"

"You don't mean to insinuate that Uncle Joshua——?"

"Yes, I do, Miss Elizabeth; and what's more, I seen it for some time a-coming to a head. And it won't be his fault nor yet hers if Mrs. Jane Lucas, widow, isn't turned into Mrs. Joshua Higgins before we know where we are."

Martha could not certainly complain of apathy on Miss Baines's part any longer. The poor lady put her hands to her head as if she were stunned. The foremost, almost the sole, thought in her mind at that moment was Violet. Among all the contingencies which might stand in the way of Violet's inheriting her granduncle's money, his marrying a second time had never presented itself to her mind. "It's impossible," she exclaimed faintly. "It can't be! You must be mistaken, Martha."

"No, Miss Elizabeth; *that* ain't very likely. But now your eyes are opened, you can look for yourself. I done my duty in telling you. And as for Miss Violet, I hope she'll find a good husband to take care of her: for her uncle's house won't be the home it has been for her much longer."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. LUCAS was not more blind than Martha as to Mr. Higgins's admiration for herself, but she was naturally much less surprised at it. The position in life which she would best have liked was that of a rich widow. But to be a rich wife would, she thought, be the next best thing. And then, if she married Mr. Higgins, a second widowhood was within reasonable expectation, and he was known to be quite a wealthy man for his station in life. Dozebury was a dull hole, but if she married Mr. Higgins she did not intend to remain mewed up in Dozebury. She indulged in bright dreams of revisiting the scenes of her former travels under altered circumstances, of occupying the best rooms in this or that foreign *pension*, where she had previously been obliged to content herself with the worst, and of rustling bravely in silk attire, instead of creeping humbly in bombazine. She knew that there were younger women than herself who would esteem themselves fortunate to become Mrs. Joshua Higgins; and she thought that a husband so much older than she was would confer an air of increased juvenility on her. In a word, she was resolved to accept him whenever he should speak.

For his part he had made up his mind on the subject long ago. His niece's prolonged absence abroad had annoyed him more than he cared to confess. Even if Elizabeth must go poking about from one outlandish place to another in search of health, Violet at least might have stayed with him, instead of sticking so fast to her aunt, who was a strangely poor creature for any one to be fond of. "But," said he to himself, "Joshua Higgins has no need to go a begging for some one to value him. If Violet, and that goose Betsy Baines, don't know what a privilege they have, others are not so stupid. And perhaps they may repent when

it's too late. But that's *their* look out!" He had formed a favourable opinion of Mrs. Lucas on first meeting her. She had a very fitting sense of his importance, and she was a fine personable woman that a man need not be ashamed to see at the head of his table. She had been in Charnham two months before Miss Baines and Violet returned to England. And, little as they guessed it, she had been the main cause of their hasty summons home. Mr. Higgins was minded to have Mrs. Lucas over in Dozebury for a while, and to witness her behaviour in his own house before he finally raised her to the proud position of being its mistress; and for this purpose it was necessary to have some female member of the family to play propriety He sent for his nieces with a chuckling self-satisfaction in the thought that they little imagined to what end they were summoned; and that they would hurry back to celebrate their own discomfiture. He had by no means made up his mind to leave Violet entirely unprovided for. But she would not, at all events, be his sole heiress. And if she wished to come in for anything handsome she must change her conduct a little, and show some proper deference and attachment to her prospective benefactor.

Nevertheless, if Mr. Higgins had a soft place in his heart at all, it was for this orphan girl. She reminded him of the dead niece whom he had loved long ago even as his own child. And there were moments when, if Violet had been cunning to curry favour with the old man, even Mrs. Lucas's influence weighed against hers might have kicked the beam.

It would not have been easy for Dozebury to scent out what was in the wind from Mr. Higgins's demeanour. He did not curtail any of his usual occupations in order to devote more time to the lady's society. But Mrs. Lucas was not so reticent, and she dropped several hints of her new prospects to Mrs. Fox, which was equivalent, in point of ensuring publicity, to engaging the bellman to cry the news

from one end of Dozebury High Street to the other. And thus it came to pass that Violet got her first intimation of it from Kitty Low. Miss Baines, enlightened by Martha's revelation, had a nervous dread of mentioning it to her niece analogous to that which prevents some persons from making a will—as though an event could be tempted to happen by talking of it! Violet was more astonished than afflicted by the news. She had never built on her uncle's inheritance. And above all, Mario did not build on it. That was the main point of it all for her. If there were any likelihood that Mario should find himself disappointed or deluded, then, indeed, the matter would have been terrible. But as it was, she could not feel it to be so. Indeed, at the bottom of her heart there sprang up an undefined hope that this marriage might make her own course smoother. "Are you sure of it, Kitty?" she asked.

"I'm sure Mrs. Lucas said what I told you, Miss Moore. But as for being sure of the rest,—I never believe half the clack I hear. Mrs. Lucas would have had us think that she was holding off, and couldn't make up her mind to accept Mr. Higgins——"

"I don't wonder at *that*," interrupted Violet.

"Never you believe it, Miss Moore. Your uncle's a man of substance, and a man of respectability, and a good marriage for her, as such folks think of marriage. But perhaps after all it isn't true. Mrs. Lucas don't govern her tongue very strict. And a cup'll run over on the side you tip it. She was sure to tip it on the side of being sought after."

But Mrs. Lucas's hints were justified very speedily. That same evening, as they all sat at supper, Mr. Higgins cleared his throat and looked around him in a manner to bespeak attention. Mrs. Lucas, who sat at his right hand, was fluttered and fidgety. But Mr. Higgins was supported on that, as on all other occasions, by the profound conviction that whatever he did was wisely and well done: his creed being, not so much

that the will of Providence should be his will, as that his will was manifestly the will of Providence.

"Well now," said he in his accustomed bawling tones. "I wish to say a few words to you, Niece Elizabeth and Niece Violet."

Miss Baines turned pale, and clasped her hands under cover of the tablecloth.

"I'm not bound, as you know, to give an account of my actions to anybody. But I act according to my principles, which have ever been to behave kind and considerate to my family so long as they do their duty by me; and even perhaps a little beyond that."

There was a silence. Mrs. Lucas put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I therefore think it right," pursued Mr. Higgins, staring round on them solemnly and letting his hand fall heavily on the table, "to let you know, before the banns are published, that I mean to marry the lady you now see before you, who to see is equally to admire, and who I have reason to think is highly worthy of being put in the position of my wife. This lady, Jane Lucas by name, is more than willing to behave with family affection towards them with whom she will shortly be united in the relationship of aunt-in-law by the bonds of matrimony. And I hope her kind intentions will be corresponded to. That's all," said Uncle Joshua, bringing his oration to a rather abrupt conclusion.

Mrs. Lucas rose in an agitated manner, and proceeded to embrace Violet, who was nearest to her, with great effusiveness. Violet received the caress very well, and kissed Mrs. Lucas's plump cheek in return, saying simply, "I hope you and Uncle Joshua will live peacefully and happily together."

But when it came to Miss Baines's turn, instead of embracing the bride elect, or making any congratulatory speech whatever, the poor lady, losing all self-command, exclaimed, "Oh Mrs. Lucas, I couldn't have believed it of you!" and, bursting into tears, hurried out of the room.

This was not precisely a cheerful way of receiving such an announcement; but Mr. Higgins was not altogether displeased by it. He was not unwilling that Betsy should feel mortified and cut up. It served her right! He much preferred this manifestation on her part to any show of indifference. Violet, in fact, had taken the announcement too coolly to please him. She looked disturbed and distressed enough now, however, and made as if she would have followed her aunt from the room.

"Remain where you are, if *you* please, Violet," said Mr. Higgins; "when your Aunt Betsy can comport herself as is befitting, she'll come back. Until then it's as well for her to stay away. She must understand that any word disrespectful to Jane Lucas will be considered the same as being disrespectful to *me*,—or pretty nigh it," he added, feeling that the original statement needed some modification.

"Oh dear, I'm sure, Mr. Higgins, it's only natural," said Mrs. Lucas. "It must be a trial at first to think of any one coming between her and one so venerated and looked up to all these years. I know not how I should support it myself. We women, alas! are not always able to control our emotions."

"I expect the women that live in my house to keep their emotions under, Jane Lucas," said Mr. Higgins with a Jove-like air.

Presently Miss Baines returned, very red-eyed, and pale-cheeked, and humble, and made her congratulations to her uncle, which were graciously, if not cordially, received, and there was outward peace. Mr. Higgins approved his future wife's behaviour. It was quite proper that she should not take too much upon herself, nor show any airs or ill-nature. If Betsy Baines behaved amiss, that was for *him* to reprove. Before Miss Baines returned to Woodbine Cottage that night, Mrs. Lucas took an opportunity of whispering to her that she hoped they should be friends, and that she bore no malice for a hasty word. Miss Baines met

this advance more than half way, feeling that she had been injudicious on Violet's behalf. And she besought Mrs. Lucas with tears in her eyes to be good to that poor dear orphan girl, who would have no one to stand in the place of a parent to her when she (Betsy Baines) should be no more. "My dear creature, I entreat you to quell your tumult," replied Mrs. Lucas fervently. "She shall be to me as my own—younger sister."

The next day the aunt and niece talked over their own prospects and plans. Violet was keen about returning to Rome. "Uncle Joshua might have spared us the journey home," said she. "He will not want us now. And he cannot complain if you and I take our own way as he has taken his."

Poor Miss Baines sighed, and shook her head. "I shouldn't like you to go against your uncle Joshua," she said feebly. "Remember, Violet, how much depends on pleasing him."

"Dear Aunt Betsy, we came home to please him, and you see——! I know—I know that you are thinking only of my interests and not at all of yourself. But it is vain to waste our lives in watching for what may never come, or may come too late."

But Miss Baines had already passed too many years of her life in hoping for an inheritance for Violet to be able to relinquish the habit all at once. However, she ended by saying, "Well, if Uncle Joshua doesn't seem to object, we might go back to Rome for a time. I shouldn't like you to be long out of Uncle Joshua's sight, Violet. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' you know."

"I hope not," answered Violet, with a half sad smile, thinking of some one else whom absence had certainly not effaced from her mind.

Mrs. Lucas, however, unexpectedly came to her assistance in the project of returning to Italy. That model of female propriety did not think it fitting to remain an inmate of Mr. Higgins's house between the announcement of the engagement and the performance of the marriage, which was to take place

within three weeks. And on mentioning this view to Mr. Higgins he at once suggested her removing to Woodbine Cottage during the interval. He did not think it necessary to ask Miss Baines's consent to this arrangement beforehand, but told her explicitly that it should cost her nothing. And in fact he sent in lavish supplies of various household articles to Miss Baines's house; and bade her, if more were wanted, to order more in his name. Violet was to remain in his house. Thus the girl was thrown more into her uncle's company than had yet been the case since her return to England. She made tea for him at breakfast, which they took *tête-à-tête*, and was at hand very often when he came into the house at odd moments from his place of business. The old man was kinder and gentler to her when they were alone together than at any other times. And often Violet regretted that she was bound by a promise to Mario to keep their engagement secret, for there were moments when she thought her uncle would have listened not unfavourably to what she had to tell him. One morning, when he was in a particularly mild mood, he said to her, "Violet, I mean to make you a present when I am married. What shall it be? What would you like best? I shall go as high as fifty pounds."

"Fifty pounds!" cried the girl, clasping her hands. "Oh, Uncle Joshua, that's a great deal of money!"

This pleased him. "Yes, my lass," said he, complacently. "It is a great deal of money. But I do things handsomely when I do 'em. So you tell me what you'd like to the tune of a fifty-pound note, and you shall have it."

"I should like—I'm to say the truth?"

"Of course! And it wouldn't be much in your way to tell a lie, I'll say that for you."

"Then I should like you to give me the money, Uncle Joshua."

His face fell a little. "The money, hey? And what would you do with it?"

"I would pay my travelling expenses back to Italy, and save Aunt Betsy's pocket."

In this way Violet announced to her uncle the plan she had formed; and she was surprised to find him listen to it with kindness. He waited very quietly until she had done setting forth her reasons—her aunt's health, her own pleasure, the fact that he would have no further need of them at home. And then he said, "Well, now, you've up and spoken the truth to me, Violet, and that's more than your Aunt Betsy has done—oh ay, yes, I dare say, she's timid and all the rest. Well and good. It isn't for you to speak against her, certainly. But you've more gumption in your little finger than she has in her whole body. Now I'll tell *you* something that will perhaps surprise you a good deal. Jane Lucas and me are going abroad ourselves for a wedding *tower*. It may be only to Paris, it may be farther, right yonder into Italy. That'll be according to how I like it, of course. Jane Lucas she's mad for me to see Rome. I think she'll be a bit disappointed in my opinion of it; but she wants to *have* my opinion. There's not many men at my time of life that would be up to facing such a long journey into foreign parts. But, as Jane Lucas says, she should just like me to let folks see what my constitution is. She's a trifle conceited about it, perhaps. But we must excuse that. But now, to show you what her kind-heartedness is, and how she wishes to do all she can for *my* family, she has been begging and coaxing with all her might to get me to take you along with us to Rome! I haven't said no, and I haven't said yes. What do *you* say?"

"I say—I say that the very thought of it makes me wild with joy, and that I thank you and her a thousand times!"

Numberless hopes and projects rushed into Violet's mind. If once Uncle Joshua could be brought face to face with Mario he could not fail to like him. He might even help him; for Uncle Joshua was generous

with his money when he chose To return to Rome so soon, to return in the company of relatives who were kind to her, and might possibly be kind to *him!* It was like a delightful dream! But all at once she stopped short, and exclaimed, "And Aunt Betsy?"

"Oh, well—Aunt Betsy may be welcome to join the travelling party for aught I know. But what I mean is that *you* will travel at our expense. And you shall have your fifty pound into the bargain."

CHAPTER XIX.

THERE wanted but ten days to the wedding, when one night the news came to Mr. Higgins's house that old Mrs. Fox had "had a stroke," and was lying at the point of death. Mr. Higgins had already gone to bed. But Violet immediately put on her bonnet, and set off to see if she could be of any help or comfort to her friend Kitty Low. She found the latter very quiet and calm, carrying out the instructions of the doctor who had just left the house.

"Why it's never you, Miss Violet!" exclaimed Kitty in a hushed voice when she saw Violet standing under the cold starlight on the threshold.

"Yes, Kitty; I came to see if I could do anything. How is your grandmother?"

"Just about setting out on the long journey, Miss Violet. There's little hope of a rally. But I shall do what the doctor bids. But you—you really came out of kindness to help me? I didn't expect that. I knew you were a kind-disposed young lady, but folks so often stop short at being disposed. Well, I'm thankful to you. And I shan't forget it. But just you go back home and get into your warm bed. I don't want no help. But I shan't forget what you've done, Miss Violet."

Violet, however, finding that Kitty was alone in

the house, refused to leave her. She sent word home by James Rawlinson, who had unwillingly attended her with much elaborate shivering and demonstrations of fatigue and sleepiness, that she should remain in Mrs. Fox's cottage for the night. The two young women sat one on each side of the bed in the small clean chamber where Mrs. Fox lay, heavily breathing away the last hours of her earthly existence. At first they talked a little in whispers, although their loudest tones would have failed to rouse the dulled hearing of the old woman. But by degrees they fell into silence, broken only by the stertorous breathing of the figure on the bed, by the loud slow ticking of the clock, and by the piercing chirp of the crickets on the warm kitchen hearth.

Violet felt a sudden gleam across her eyes, and awoke with a start to find that Kitty had opened the shutters and let in the cold grey light of the morning. She also found herself covered with shawls, and had had a pillow deftly slipped behind her head during the night. She roused herself, full of self-reproach. "Oh, Kitty," she exclaimed, "why did you let me sleep? That is not what I came for. I have done you no good."

"You've done me more good than I can say. More good than buckets of doctor's stuff. It was a comfort to know you were here. And as to going to sleep, it was only natural. You're young, poor thing."

Violet cast a glance at the bed. The clean check curtains were closely drawn round it. "She's gone, Miss Violet," said Kitty. "Slipped away so quiet as you couldn't hardly say when the last moment came."

"Oh, Kitty; I'm so sorry for you."

"Yes, you are; I can see that. Poor granny, she was good to me for many a year."

"How lonely you will be now, Kitty."

"Lonely enough. But I never much expected to be anything else. Now you go home and lie down. I shall step round to my neighbour, Mrs. Sykes, and she'll help me to do what has to be done."

Mrs. Fox's funeral was attended by all the most respectable inhabitants of Dozebury. Mr. Halliday preached a sermon, in which he spoke of her late husband's long connection with St. Mary's, and of the virtues of the deceased, which were, on his showing, nearly all summed up in the supreme merit of having been "a staunch Churchwoman." Kitty was not so philosophical but that she was gratified by this public tribute to the respectable position held by her grandfather and grandmother; even although it came from Mr. Halliday, of whose intelligence, as we know, she had but a poor opinion.

After the funeral was over, Kitty Low, in her cool, undemonstrative manner, proposed to Violet to take service with her and Miss Baines, and to accompany them abroad.

"Oh, my dear Kitty," replied Violet; "I don't believe Aunt Betsy is rich enough to think of having such a luxury as a travelling maid."

"Well, a lady's maid may be a luxury, or may not, Miss Violet. From what I've seen, I fancy they're mostly luxuries after the fashion of a tight boot with a high heel. But I think I could be useful to your aunt. She's timid and gentle, and apt to get put upon. I'd serve her faithful without wages so long as we was travelling abroad—just for my keep and my journeys."

"But, my dear good creature, you could easily get your keep and good wages into the bargain elsewhere."

"Yes, I know I could. But I shouldn't get other things I care more for. This is how the case is: I'm not destitute. My grandmother left me what little property she had. It isn't much; but it's enough to stand between me and the workhouse. And so long as I have my health, of course I can earn my living. I've thought it all over; and I've said to myself, 'Kitty Low, what is it the folks are all striving for?' Why to get what happiness they can out of their span of life. To be sure the most of us seek after happiness

in a blind, blundering kind of a way. Some even looks to find it by squeezing their vitals with tight stays,—we mortals are such a curious breed! Now, through me being so plain, I haven't the temptations of vanity to blind me. I might squeeze myself flat in a mangle, Miss Violet, before any man would think of keeping company with me for my looks. And I'm not very greedy about money. Well, then, what is it I really want and wish for to make me a bit contented? Why just to be near some one as likes me a little, and that I can be useful to. I should dearly love to be near you, Miss Violet, and do what I could for you. There's no merit in that. It would be my way of making myself comfortable. Is it true, or isn't it, that man does not live by bread alone? We have pretty high authority for believing so. But most on us use our Bibles as we use the best parlour,—shut it up tight and dark all the week, and go and shiver in it o' Sundays."

Violet was greatly touched by this offer. And the more she turned it over in her mind, the more she felt inclined to secure Kitty's services, if possible. If Violet married, her aunt would necessarily have less of her care and attention than heretofore. She thought of the poor lady alone, perhaps in a Roman lodging, left to the mercies of Mariuccia, or some similar rough coarse creature, to whom she would be simply an outlandish, incomprehensible, troublesome person. And then she thought what a blessing clean, silent, honest, neat-handed Kitty Low would be under such circumstances. She broached the subject to her aunt, and expended all her eloquence in recommending that they should give Kitty a trial. "And look here, Aunt Betsy," said she, "you won't have the expense of my journey and my board this time. And Kitty Low will probably be a less costly travelling companion to you than I have been. And Uncle Joshua has promised me fifty pounds. Do let me pay your maid's journey with that! Come, Aunt Betsy, don't be stingy. I've

never had the pleasure of paying anything for you, and you have paid so much for me, you greedy thing!" And Violet coaxingly put her arms round her aunt's neck, and her smooth young cheek against her aunt's pale withered face.

Miss Baines was nearly vanquished. But she refused to give her final consent until Uncle Joshua should be consulted. "I'll undertake to tell him," said Violet.

"Tell him? *Ask* him, you mean, my dear; ask him! I shan't give my consent without his."

Violet took the first opportunity of speaking to her uncle, and it happened that Mrs. Lucas was present. She had been invited by Mr. Higgins to inspect some patterns for a new carpet which was to be bought for the drawing-room; and was sitting in great state with the scraps of carpet spread out before her, mightily enjoying the importance of her position. Mr. Higgins was seated in his easy-chair near the window, reading a newspaper.

"Oh, Uncle Joshua," said Violet, coming in full of her subject, "Aunt Betsy wants to know what you would think of her taking a maid to go abroad with her. I hope you'll approve, for I do!"

Before Mr. Higgins could speak, Mrs. Lucas broke in. "A maid! What can your Aunt Betsy want with a maid?"

"That is what I am about to set before my uncle," answered Violet. And she proceeded to expatiate on the usefulness of a good English servant to her aunt, who was not strong, and who often needed little attentions which it was vain to expect from strangers. "And then this pearl of a servant, who is the best creature in the world, and can do anything—wash and starch, and iron, and sew, and cook—this wonderful treasure will come without wages so long as we remain abroad! Only think of that, Uncle Joshua!"

Again Mrs. Lucas interposed: this time with a heightened colour and a distinct expression of anger on

her round visage. "Why you don't mean to say you are speaking of Kitty Low?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I do, Mrs. Lucas."

"Then I consider it shameful," cried Mrs. Lucas, in a tone much sharper than her ordinary mellifluous one. "I fully intended to take Kitty Low abroad myself as my own maid if she were free. I spoke of it to her, in fact. And it was only her grandmother that stood in the way. And now for Miss Baines to cut in and forestall me——! But I will not submit to it. I shall tell Kitty that I have the prior claim; and that she need not serve *me* without wages. And, moreover, I should give her a permanent place here as parlour-maid when I return home."

Violet's quick indignation at the tone of this speech was quenched by beholding her uncle's face, which Mrs. Lucas could not discern very well from where she sat, and which in her heat she had not observed. Mr. Higgins had pushed up his spectacles on his forehead, and was glaring at his betrothed with an expression of indignant amazement.

"Hulloa!" cried he suddenly in a voice which made Mrs. Lucas jump. "What is all this of 'I shall' and 'I shan't' and 'I mean to engage' this person and that person? Where was it you intended to give the young woman the place of parlour-maid, if I may venture to put the question?"

Mrs. Lucas changed colour, and became rather tremulous; but she tried to keep a bold front. Both parties felt that a decisive struggle was at hand.

"I—here, of course; in our house," she answered majestically.

"Oh! Here in our house?" repeated Mr. Higgins very slowly, and still glaring at her. "May I ask when you came into possession of any portion of these premises, Jane Lucas? So far as I know this freehold property belongs to Joshua Higgins, as it did to his father before him. And may I further inquire on what

journey you were thinking of taking a maid-servant abroad with you, Jane Lucas?"

Mrs. Lucas grew redder and redder, and began to grope in her pocket for her handkerchief, so as to be ready for all emergencies. "Upon our wedding tour, Mr. Higgins," she answered. "I thought it only becoming that your wife should have a maid to wait upon her if a suitable one could be found."

"In—deed! And all this without saying a word to me, Jane Lucas?"

"I should, of course, have consulted you before settling anything, Mr. Higgins. But I couldn't suppose but what you would deem it fitting for your bride to have due attendance."

"In—deed!"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Higgins. And if you have so little consideration for the feelings of one who is shortly to be——"

"Yes? You were proceeding to make some observations, Jane Lucas. I'm waiting."

"Well, I mean to say that I am very sensitive; extremely so. And I have been accustomed to the tenderest treatment. And if you cannot appreciate refinement of sentiment, Mr. Higgins, it may be better to——"

"Yes? You were proceeding to make some further observations, Jane Lucas. I'm waiting."

"Well, then, better for me to draw back while there is yet time, sir. That's all!" exclaimed Mrs. Lucas, expending her last ammunition in one burst, and instantly retiring behind her handkerchief in a flood of tears.

"Aha! Now that's just the point I wanted to come to. I begin, Jane Lucas, as I mean to go on; so as to avoid mistakes in future. I'm master here, and I intend to continue so. As to your arranging anything in this household before you're my wife, I consider it a liberty. And whatever you do afterwards must be under my approbation. Don't you take too much on

yourself. That's my advice to *you*, Jane Lucas. None of the women of my family have ever been allowed to take too much on themselves, and I don't mean you to be the first. So now you have been told the state of the case fair and plain, and can make up your mind about 'drawing back,' as you said. I'll give you up to five o'clock this afternoon to decide. After that it'll be too late for you to say anything on the subject. With regard to Aunt Betsy's question, Violet, you can tell her I approve her good sense in appealing to me; and that I see no objection to my niece, Miss Baines, of Woodbine Cottage, engaging an attendant if she thinks it needful for her years and infirmities. When others require attendance for similar reasons they shall have it. Now you and me will go out for a little walk, and leave Jane Lucas to recover her spirits."

Mrs. Lucas could not be said to have recovered her spirits by supper time, being languid, and complaining of "nerves:" "which," said she in a plaintive voice, "I have had for years, although few persons suppose it," as though she were peculiarly aggrieved by possessing those portions of the human anatomy. But she had evidently made her peace with Mr. Higgins. She had been mortified to find how much she had miscalculated her power over him. And perhaps still more mortified at his having spoken before Violet. But she was not disposed to relinquish being Mrs. Higgins, for all that. Nevertheless the incident rankled in her mind. And whereas before she had felt only a superior toleration for Miss Baines, and a patronizing inclination to be gracious to Violet, she now nourished a secret resentment against them both. But she was still keen to have Violet with her on her visit to Rome. For the title of the Duke of Pontalto sounded in her ears with seductive sweetness. And she pictured to herself her own entrance into the Guarinis' *salon* attired in her smartest new gown, and the fine acquaintances she would be sure to make there, with eager anticipation. "But when once I

have made my own position, I shall allow the Baines party to sink into the background," said she to herself.

So the preparations for the wedding went on. The appointed day arrived. Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Higgins, having been joined together in holy matrimony in the morning, started for London in the afternoon. Miss Baines and Violet, attended by Kitty Low in her plain black gown, joined them a few days later at Folkestone. And thence the strangely-assorted party proceeded to the Continent together.

CHAPTER XX.

"AND this is Rome, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Joshua Higgins in accents of the bitterest contempt. He had staggered out of the station under the weight of a heavy parcel of wraps in one hand, and a valise in the other; while his wife bore a second bundle of shawls and a huge dressing-bag, and Kitty Low was laden like a packhorse with other property belonging to the ladies of the party. It was a bright afternoon early in April. The sun shone; the sky was blue; little breezes blew the dust in eddies about the wide Sahara-like expanse of ground in front of the Roman railway terminus. Mr. Higgins was tired, and dusty, and heated, and dazed. He had been buffeted by the crowd in his attempt to get out, roared at by deafening hotel touters, and had had a hand-to-hand tussle with a functionary of the city *octroi*, who merely desired to ascertain that he had nothing eatable in his valise, but whom he assumed to be attempting to despoil him of his property.

"*This*," repeated Mr. Higgins, standing breathless on the pavement outside the station, and gazing around him very red and angry, "is Rome!"

"Roma! Albergo di Roma! Hôtel de Rome! Rome hôtel, sare," shouted an omnibus conductor, plucking

him by the sleeve, whilst another made an effort to possess himself of the bundle of rugs. Mr. Higgins's hands were too fully occupied to allow of his doubling his fists. But he glared about him like an angry bull, and was proceeding to express his sentiments in a series of idiomatic objurgations, when Violet came to the rescue. By her and Kitty Low's combined exertions the party were safely packed into two cabs, the luggage tickets were confided to a porter, and they drove away down the long modern street, called the Via Nazionale, towards the boarding-house where they had engaged rooms.

"I suppose you've made up your mind to take leave of your luggage for good and all, Jane Higgins?" said her lord when he had somewhat recovered his breath.

"La, Mr. Higgins, I hope not. Why?"

"You don't suppose that fellow will bring it to the house, do you?"

"Oh, he will indeed, uncle," put in Violet. "I've got his number. Here it is," and she held up a brass plate with a number engraved on it.

"Number? Pooh! Much *he* cares for numbers!"

"But he's bound you know, Uncle Joshua, to deliver safely——"

"Bound!" (with an accent of indescribable disdain and incredulity). "What's to bind *him?*"

"The law, Uncle Joshua."

"The law? Tcha! You're not such a simpleton as to suppose *he* minds the law, are you?"

In a word, Mr. Higgins maintained this singular theory of the railway porter's extra-legality and superiority to all judicial institutions with the utmost vigour, and as it appeared to give him some satisfaction, and to divert his mind from other causes of annoyance, Violet soon ceased to contest the point.

At length they all reached the boarding-house, and were comfortably installed. Mr. and Mrs. Higgins were accommodated according to express stipulation with a private sitting-room which, though small, was

neat and comfortable, and presently, when they had rested and washed themselves, and refreshed themselves with food, Mr. Higgins's attitude of mind towards the Eternal City became somewhat less ferocious. The arrival of the luggage in due course, although it relieved his mind of anxiety, did not at all modify his views as to the porter.

"Well, I'm glad it has so turned out," said he to his wife, when he beheld the respectable, stout, English-made trunks ranged in the bedroom; "and that the fellow did not think it worth while to make away with them. If he'd have taken it into his head, he might have broken up the boxes, and been off to the mountains among the brigands with everything packed on mule-back by now. Police? Don't tell me! You don't imagine the police would meddle with *him?* *He* knows all about the police, you may depend; most likely they're in league with him."

Violet's first thought on arriving had been to possess herself of two letters that were awaiting her, and to shut herself up in her own room with them. One was from Nina Guarini; the other from Mario Masi. It need scarcely be said that the latter was first opened. She sat down on the side of the bed in the little room assigned to her, and eagerly took it out of its cover. There was one disappointing circumstance evident even before she began to read it,—it was very short. Nor were its contents such as altogether to make amends for this disappointment.

"Dearest Violetta," it ran, "your letter announcing your return to Rome reached me in the midst of an extraordinary press of business. I am, indeed, still working very hard, and everything seems to rest on my shoulders. Of course I shall not present myself at your domicile while you are with your uncle, or until you have prepared him to receive me as an acquaintance. We had better for the present continue to keep our engagement secret. Let me see your uncle, so as to

make a good impression on him before the truth is revealed. As soon as you and the respectable Zia Elisabetta—to whom say so many things for me—are installed in your own apartment, I shall fly to see you. La Guarini will come to you, and I shall hear your news from her. *Addio, tesoro mio.*

"*Tuo,* MARIO.

"P.S.—Do you think your uncle would buy some shares of our company, or of the *Tribune of the People?* —M. M."

"Well, of course," said Violet to herself, after reading and re-reading this epistle; "he is too busy to write long letters just now. And ought I to complain of that, when he is working for my sake? If it had not been for me, he would have been leading his old cheerful life, free from care and anxiety, at this moment."

But the injunction to keep secrecy as to their engagement gave her a feeling of distress which was not easily dispelled or reasoned away. "I cannot live a life of deceit and concealment," she said. "It was hard, even in England, when Mario was far away. But now and here, when we shall meet every day, and often in my uncle's presence, I shall have to be constantly acting a part. Mario has not thought of that. He cannot have pictured to himself what it would be."

Then she opened Nina's letter, which she had well-nigh forgotten. It was very affectionate, but Violet thought there was a slight shade in it of something that was rather sadness than constraint—something less bright and trenchant than the Signora's usual style. She could not guess that the shade of sadness—which in truth was there—arose from pity for herself.

"I shall come," said Nina, in conclusion, "to pay my respects to your new aunt, if you tell me that my visit will be well received. It is the custom here, you know, for the latest comer to call first. But Madame Higgins may not know that, and I shall not stand on etiquette with her. I wish to coax and please this lady,

who has power to do so much for my little Violet, *comprends-tu?*"

Violet had no doubt as to the Signora Guarini's visit being well received, and she sent her friend a note to that effect the same evening. For that night she and Miss Baines were to remain in the boarding-house, but the following day they intended to seek a furnished apartment, where they could live less expensively, as they said, and where (as they did not say) they could enjoy more quiet and independence, and have their old confidential talks together, free from the somewhat oppressive society of Mrs. Joshua Higgins. The boarding-house dinner had fortunately been found satisfactory by both Mr. and Mrs. Higgins; and as the house—owing to the season being advanced—was by no means full, the landlady was able to devote a great deal of her attention to the new comers, which gave Mr. Higgins a favourable idea of her intelligence. So that on the whole, when the party was assembled in the private sitting-room, and Uncle Joshua had been supplied with a glass of grog and his pipe, his mood was more serene and pleasant than might have been expected by any one who had chanced to witness the stormy scene of his arrival that afternoon.

Violet's announcement that the Signora Guarini proposed calling on Mrs. Higgins was most graciously received. "I shall be happy to see her, Violet," said Mrs. Higgins; "and I wish I could know when she was likely to come, so that I might have on my lilac satin. There is a great deal in first impressions, and I would not have her think that your uncle's bride is unworthy of her position."

"What's the lady's name, again?" asked Uncle Joshua.

"Guarini, Uncle," answered Violet.

"Gwarrinny? Why, that's the name of the party you warned my nieces against, Jane Higgins, in the days when you was Jane Lucas!" said Uncle Joshua, with great distinctness. The old man did not over-rate

his youthfulness in one particular at least—namely, the possession of a singularly clear and retentive memory. His new wife had already found this faculty inconvenient on more than one occasion. It was vain to attempt persuading Mr. Higgins that he was mistaken or confused as to any incident which had once come within the sphere of his experience. He would bring forward names, dates, and minute particulars with overwhelming accuracy. "You've changed your note completely, it seems," pursued Mr. Higgins. "You're all agog to know this lady yourself now!"

"Not at all, Mr. Higgins. But if she wants to pay her respects to me—to us, I shall have no objection to see her. As to what you allude to, I was misinformed. But you remember that you yourself approved my putting your nieces on their guard."

"Yes, so long as I thought it all genuine, Jane Higgins. But I begin to see that you really knew nothing about the party in question—not to call knowing,—when you wrote to Betsy; and only wanted to show off a bit. It came of taking too much on yourself, as usual. That's the great fault you've got to guard against, Jane Higgins."

Certainly Mr. Higgins could not be accused of too great uxoriousness, or any tendency to over-indulging his bride. He lectured and snubbed her and corrected her in public and in private with the utmost ruthlessness, whenever he thought he observed her straying into that besetting sin of "taking too much on herself." At the same time he was willing that she should enjoy the good things of this life which he had bestowed on her; and even shine, with a reflected lustre, as a mighty genteel, superior-mannered, personable woman, who did credit to Mr. Joshua Higgins's taste. For example, later on in the evening, when they were discussing what they should do next day by way of commencing their sight-seeing, and when Violet mentioned that she purposed going to see her friend the Signora Guarini, her uncle begged that she would

make her visit very early in the morning, so as to be back in time to accompany them about eleven o'clock on their expedition.

"Not at all necessary," began Mrs. Higgins. But her husband proceeded without heeding her. "You can be back here by eleven, Violet, I suppose? By that time we shall have settled where we mean to go."

"If you really want me, Uncle Joshua."

"Well, I expect I *shall* want you. We mean to walk; and I don't feel sure about finding my way from this little fool of a map. And Jane Higgins, she don't feel sure about finding *her* way. And as we can neither of us speak the I-talian language——"

"Lor, Mr. Higgins," interposed his bride; "I'm sure I can make myself understood perfectly. And then there's my knowledge of French to fall back upon."

Mr. Higgins was not unwilling to admit his wife's accomplishments. And, indeed, he honestly believed in them to a certain extent. But he remarked to her that he had noticed in coming along in the railway that, as soon as they got into Italy, she seemed not to understand what the folks said. "And," said he, "that's the chief point after all, when you want the natives to give you any information. Now Violet, she makes 'em out like print."

"I, you see, have been chiefly accustomed to Florence, where the accent is well known to be remarkably pure," said Mrs. Higgins bridling.

"Ah well, I dare say that may be it," returned her husband in perfect good faith. "But, as we don't happen to be in Florence, we'll get Violet to help us out until you can bring yourself down to the inferior lingo here."

The next morning Violet set off betimes, taking Kitty Low with her, to the Guarinis, who lived at no great distance. It was still early when she reached the well-known door; and, what with haste and what with emotion, Violet was almost breathless as she rang the bell. Pippo appeared to answer the summons, and

greeted the young lady with a grave smile and a bow. "*Ben tornata, Signorina,*" said he. "Welcome back to Rome."

This was more, she reflected, than any one had said to her in Dozebury. Kitty Low, with tight-shut mouth and steady light blue eye, took silent note of Pippo; and Pippo, perfectly at his ease, and without appearing to cast a glance in her direction, took silent note of Kitty Low. Pippo said that the Signora was not yet out of her room, but would, he thought, receive the Signorina. He would go and inquire; and meanwhile Violet and her attendant were ushered into the little chintz room to wait. Pippo, however, returned almost immediately, begging Violet to follow him, and in another minute she stood in her friend's presence.

Nina was breakfasting in her dressing-gown, and looked very handsome and graceful in a pale blue cashmere robe, and with her abundant black hair richly waving about her head. "My dear child," said she, holding Violet at arm's length, after having embraced her; "and you are really glad to see me again?"

"I am really most glad, dear Signora Nina."

"Violet, you are very like some one whom I dearly loved: *very* like! You have grown more so in your absence. It is strange!"

The truth was that Violet's face had gained in intensity and expression. It was a very young face still, of course; but it had suffered. The child-like smoothness was no longer there, and in those deeper, more womanly lines, Nina saw not only a likeness to her dead sister's outward form, but a suggestion of Marie's earnest spirit, and loving, self-sacrificing nature.

Naturally, they began to talk first of Mario Masi. How the new journal, the *Tribune of the People*, was going on. Nina said she supposed Violet knew better than any one could tell her. Of course Masi had written all particulars to her. Violet shook her head. Mario had said very little on that subject. He had

so little time for writing. All at once Nina said abruptly, "And is this business really, really to go on, little one?"

"The newspaper?"

"No, *carina*; I mean——you still hold to your engagement with Masi?"

Violet looked at her with startled eyes. "Of course!" she said. "Why should I not?"

"That is so difficult a question to answer! If I said, 'Because he is poor and struggling,' you would answer, of course, 'All the more reason for me to cling to him!' If I said, 'Because his prospects are so uncertain that you may not be able to marry for years,' you would answer, 'I can wait.' If I said, 'Because he is not wholly worthy of you,' you would answer, 'I don't believe you!'"

"Certainly, I should answer that. But I should say something more. I should say, 'Signora Nina, that is a vague accusation unworthy of you. If you have any charge to bring against Mario, bring it fairly and distinctly, so that it can be met."

"I have no charge, no accusation, child, in the sense you mean. But—*ecco!* Your standard of life is very different from his. You would expect what he could not give you, and what he would think you childish for expecting. Your views of many things would be incomprehensible to him, as his would be incomprehensible to you."

"No, indeed; you are greatly mistaken there! Mario always understands me. And as for me, I am inexperienced, I know, and far less clever than he is; but I am young enough to learn, and I am not so obstinate and conceited as to set up my own views as the only right ones. I am sure I shall be able to adapt myself to his. When you are fond of a person that helps you to understand."

Nina looked at the girl for a minute with an indescribable expression, partly sorrowful, partly smiling, wholly kind and loving. Then she drew her towards

her and kissed her, and said, "I cannot afford to make you dislike me, Violet."

"I shall never dislike you—unless you are unjust to Mario. I *ought* not to like any one who is against him, you know."

"Enough, enough, *ma chèrie!* I might have known I should do no good by speaking. There is no other way to learn the lessons of life but living. As for Masi, I am not against him, little one. He knows that I am his friend, and I want you to know that I am yours. And if in future you have troubles—you know they come to all, like the rain falling on the just and unjust—you must promise to confide them to me. I may be able to help you. I shall surely be willing. And to help Masi, too, of course," she added, smiling, for she read Violet's face like a book. "To help him, too; that's the same thing as helping you, isn't it?"

Violet heartily assented to this, and returned her friend's kiss with all her old cordiality, which had been manifestly chilled by Nina's former speeches.

"And now," said Nina, "tell me all about your new aunt. Your letters merely mentioned the fact of the marriage."

Then Violet narrated all that she knew about Mrs. Joshua Higgins, but charitably reserved a good deal of what she thought; and she described their life at Dozebury, and told about Kitty Low, in whom Nina was much interested, and whom she desired to see. Kitty in her prim black gown, and neat bonnet of peculiar ugliness, came quietly into the gaily-furnished and thoroughly foreign-looking chamber, and being invited sat down, and comported herself with her usual staid discretion.

Nina's rapid English, spoken with a foreign accent, puzzled her somewhat at first, but, having a quick ear, she was soon able to follow it without difficulty. Nina talked on in her bright way, telling her how glad Miss Moore's friends were to see her back in Rome, and how glad she (Nina) was to know that

Miss Baines and her niece had such an excellent attendant, and how she hoped Kitty would soon find herself at home in Italy, and how she meant to call and pay her respects to Mrs. Higgins, and how charmed she should be to make Uncle Joshua's acquaintance, and so forth. Until at last Kitty, pulling out a huge old silver watch which had belonged to her grandmother, begged pardon, but felt it her duty to observe that it wanted only ten minutes of eleven, and that Mr. Higgins would be waiting.

On their way back to the boarding-house Violet asked Kitty Low's opinion of her friend, the Signora Guarini. Kitty, who was a great admirer of beauty, was enthusiastic in her praise of Nina's looks; pronouncing her to be the beautifullest person she had ever seen, and dressed like a picture.

"And she is a kind dear friend to me, Kitty. So amiable and so clever!"

"Ah, clever she is, indeed!" assented Kitty. "Such a bright way with her! Lively, and yet not flighty. All her wits about her. She reminds me somehow of a conjuring gentleman with the neatest of shirt cuffs I saw at Charnham Corn Exchange. He would move his fingers so quick you could hardly see them sometimes; and handle the brittlest things in a way as seemed ever so careless. But, bless you, he always had an object in view, and he never broke anything."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE *Tribune of the People* uplifted its voice, metaphorically speaking, for a very ungrateful client. The People cared nothing about it, very seldom read it, and when they did read it, were bored by it. They preferred the *Star of Progress*, which, equally democratic, was much more amusing and popular. The

public has a quick, suspicious sense of any attempt to disguise moral, philosophical, or political teaching in what is supposed to be an alluring form adapted to its rudimentary capacities. It resents all such attempts with a sense of injury, as a child resents bitter powders lurking insidiously in jam. The result is generally to spoil the jam without mitigating the powder.

Some such suspicion attended the perusal of the *Tribune of the People*. It was not only instructive and *doctrinaire*, but it attempted to assume a playful manner of being so. Its liveliest sallies were mistrusted as a siren song, in the style of

> "Dilly, dilly, dilly, dilly,
> Co—ome and be killed!"

and were not found to be seductive. Readers looked for a lurking moral in its lightest paragraphs, and fancied they found one whether it were there or not. The *Tribune of the People* did not gravely enunciate commonplaces easily grasped by the average mind as if they were profound reflections addressed only to select intellects, whereby the reader is naturally pleased on finding that he comprehends them with facility. Neither did it print wordy columns of social philosophy which were not comprehensible at all, but the like of which are often loudly eulogized on a principle similar to that which made the courtiers in the story-book so fervently admire the embroidered robe of the King standing before them *in puris naturalibus*. Neither did it deal in scandalous stories, nor scatter broadcast shameful imputations with a light *insouciance* which suggested that the writers held their own reputation by an easy tenure, and were fearless of reprisals which could scarcely give them a worse character than they already possessed. It was not dogmatic, nor hazy, nor slanderous. It condescendingly offered its powders in spoonfuls of jam; and although avowedly a political paper, it did not hold through thick and thin with any political party.

Moreover, there was about the whole tone of the journal something indefinably *dilettante*. It displayed that ineradicable defect common to the amateur in every department of human effort, namely, a sanguine expectation of achieving results without previous preparation, which recalls the modest gentleman who said that he did not know whether he could or could not play upon the fiddle, because he had never tried. And so long as the amateur appeals to society *as* an amateur, he may confidently reckon on success. We are most of us acquainted in private life with vocalists whose performances are preferred by their friends to those of Madame Patti; violinists quite equal to Herr Joachim; painters before whom Mr. Millais must pale his ineffectual palette; and poets who would make the topmost reputation in contemporary literature totter on its throne, *if* they ever should appear in print. But happily for Art and artists, these same individuals when addressed collectively as the Great Public, have a very different standard; and ceasing to be surprised that the animal can stand on its hind legs at all, imperatively require that he should stand well.

Mario Masi had a quick intelligence, a fairly good command of his own language, and a considerable gift of raillery. But these are but a slender stock-in-trade for editing a newspaper. That enterprise, indeed, has been known to be successfully conducted by individuals possessing not one of the three. But then they had other more essential qualifications which Masi lacked: experience, an apprenticeship to journalism, a sure perception of what will "do" and what will not, arrived at by long habit, and by the slow but sure method of trying and failing and trying again. Now Mario was ready to try; perfectly ready. But he was by no means ready not to succeed. And when, after the first intoxicating joys of seeing his own lucubrations in print and hearing the *Tribune of the People* bawled about the streets by the itinerant vendors, he was brought face to face with sundry troubles and annoyances inseparable

from his calling, he jibbed, and became angry and discouraged. And the most unpromising feature in the case was that he was not chiefly troubled by what reasonably might have troubled him: the fewness of his subscribers, and the gradual dropping off of chance sales; but by the onslaughts of his brother journalists (which Guarini assured him were excellent advertisements), and by any casual expression of unfavourable opinion which happened to come to his ears.

In Italy the journalist has not always the refuge of muffling himself in that Cloak of Darkness, the anonymous and irresponsible "we." It is not obligatory on him to sign his contributions, but neither is it considered a breach of professional etiquette to name the writer of an article when he is widely known. And let any of our public instructors consider within himself whether it would not make a considerable difference to his comfort if, instead of being discussed under the form of an impersonal abstraction, such as the morning *Aurora* or the evening *Hesperus*, he were liable to be publically contradicted and pooh-poohed as the "chronically ill-informed Mr. John Smith," the "pretentiously ignorant Mr. Thomas Jones," or the "spitefully disingenuous Mr. William Brown." Mario Masi would have fought half-a-dozen duels within as many days in the beginning of his editorship, if Gino Peretti had not kept watch and ward over him, and flattered, and coaxed, and told him a variety of sugary falsehoods. Peretti was strongly interested in starting the *Tribune of the People* with an effective burst; and that had been achieved. For Peretti in this matter all would be well that began well. He had never looked forward to a prolonged existence for the paper; and if it powerfully directed public attention to the Pontine Marshes Drainage and Amelioration Company, it would have done all he demanded of it.

Nina Guarini's negotiations with Prince Massimo Nasoni had resulted in the sale to the company (on advantageous terms for the latter) of the Prince's

property at Mattoccia. In accordance with her husband's advice, she had demanded a price for her services. And casting about for a way to make the transaction useful to Masi and Violet (for whose sake, in fact, she had undertaken it), she resolved to stipulate with Peretti that a certain number of shares should be handed over to Masi as an acknowledgment of what he had done for the cause in his capacity of editor of the *Tribune of the People*. After some deliberation, she made up her mind to tell Peretti the truth: that she was interested in the lady Masi was going to marry, that she wished to help them, that Masi's pride would never allow him to accept the shares as a gift from her hands, and that, therefore, she took this method of transferring them to him. "My name had better not be mentioned in the transaction," she had said to Peretti. "You can make over the shares as if from yourself."

This Peretti agreed to readily enough, being willing to take credit to himself even "for the sunshine in July," as the Italian proverb pithily puts it. As to the Signora Nina's motives, however, for this bit of generosity he did not altogether believe her statement. But, true or untrue, it was no business of his. He said a word or two to sound Beppe Guarini on the subject, but Beppe declined to enter into it.

"I gave my wife *carte blanche* to do as she pleased," said he. "She has managed the affair for you with her usual tact and success, and I only hope she drove a hard bargain with the company. If she chooses to spend part of her gains in making presents instead of buying earrings for herself, I have nothing to say against it."

Gino Peretti was a little disappointed to find that Guarini knew all about the matter. He would have liked to take down Nina somewhat in her husband's estimation. However, he could but smile in a superior way, and murmur something about women having their foolish caprices sometimes. And he forthwith wrote to announce to Masi that fifty shares in the Pontine

Marshes Company had been made over to him. And in the fervour of composition he made so great a flourish about his own liberality as would make it difficult to confess afterwards that he had only been acting as the almoner of some one else.

But the fact of the sale of Prince Nasoni's land was kept strictly secret for the present among the small knot of persons interested. Peretti was in no hurry to announce it, since he could vaunt the exceptional advantages connected with the draining of Mattoccia without appearing to cry up his own property. Prince Nasoni was in no hurry, for sundry good reasons, one of them being a dislike to his creditors' knowing that he had come into possession of a sum of ready money, and another—and by no means the least—a dread of his mother's reproaches when she should hear that he had surreptitiously parted with another fragment of the rapidly-dwindling family estates.

As to his son, the Duke of Pontalto, the Prince troubled himself not a jot. When he did think of him, it was generally with a pleasant anticipation of the young man's discomfiture when the truth should break upon him. And so Don Ciccio remained ignorant of the transaction, which ignorance led him into a disagreeable position.

His late spiritual director, Don Silvestro, a clerical gentleman of considerable ability, who was now a main prop of the reactionary journal, the *Messenger of Peace*, in Naples, continued to follow up his first article on the subject of the Pontine Marshes scheme by a series of papers strongly recommending it, if it could be put into the right hands, and pointing out how necessary to its accomplishment would be the possession of a certain portion of land in the midst of a most fever-stricken district. The *Messenger of Peace* never mentioned Mattoccia. It mentioned a variety of other places in the neighbourhood, but never said one syllable of Mattoccia. But it circumscribed the

possibilities of making a wrong guess as to the whereabouts of the bit of land in question by giving accurate topographical details of its position. "And," said the *Messenger of Peace*, "were the company once in possession of this special bit of land, the success of their operations would be as good as assured. But could the company get possession of it?" That was what the *Messenger of Peace* strongly doubted, unless indeed the company could be composed of elements more trustworthy than at present appeared, or unless, at all events, its list of directors could be leavened with the names of one or two pious, honourable, and noble Romans—men who, disdaining to come to a transaction with the revolution, had ever maintained, &c., &c., &c.

These articles made some sensation in "Black" circles. Several distinguished members of that society hankered after fuller information on the subject of the Pontine Marshes scheme; and more than one, when the shares were announced for sale, boldly invested money in the affair, encouraged by the recommendation of so trustworthy an authority as the *Messenger of Peace*. It was hinted even that the Carlovingi—perhaps the leading family of their party in Rome, claiming a direct descent from King Pepin, and having a less apocryphal hold on the consideration of mankind by the possession of an enormous fortune, inherited from one of the successors of the poor Fisherman—even the Carlovingis were said, figuratively, to have dipped rather deeply into the Pontine Marshes; and this rumour put the shares up with a rush. The infection extended to other social spheres. Fashionable gentlemen of Liberal politics, and fashionable ladies of no politics at all, talked of the scheme at the clubs, and in boudoirs, and salons, and opera boxes, and showed themselves no less greedy of gain than their fellow-creatures of the opposite party. Whether there was on any side much serious expectation that the peasant of those pestilential districts would be benefited by the scheme, or that any good whatever would accrue from it to any

human being but the shareholders, may be doubted. But there was this difference observable: that whilst the "Blacks" expatiated on the impossibility of any good being done to the peasant, save by themselves; and whilst the "Reds" violently insisted on the indifference towards the peasant of everybody but *them*selves; the purely fashionable portion of society appeared to overlook the necessity of doing him any good at all, and dismissed unpleasant considerations connected with disease, and hunger, and ignorance, as being distinctly not their business, and requiring to be got rid of and smothered under the disinfecting influences of the newest perfume and the latest French operetta.

Thus, however, through one channel and another, from one motive and another, under one aspect and another the Pontine Marshes Drainage and Amelioration Company was in the mouths of a great many persons in Rome in those days, and excited a great deal of envy, hatred, malice, and uncharitableness. There were polemics about it in the newspapers (a boon to editors hard up for "copy" in that slack season!), and the wildest and most inconsistent stories respecting its origin, aims, and promoters, were rife everywhere. Mario Masi upheld the cause of the Company in perfect good faith, and when the popular interest in the matter was at its height Nina Guarini earnestly advised him to sell his shares. "I told you," she said, "that it would be fatal to hold after the good moment had come. It has come, but it will not last."

This was in the evening of the day when she had seen Violet, and Mario had called at the Guarinis to get his lady-love's address. It had been agreed that he should do so. Kitty Low had returned in the course of the day with a message from the Signora, importing that Miss Baines had found her old lodging unoccupied, and had taken it; and Mario was now on his way thither. But he did not show that eager haste which might have been expected under the circum-

stances. He lingered, talking, and discussing various matters with Nina, and combating her view as to the desirability of immediately getting rid of the shares.

"They will go higher yet, Signora Nina," said he. "I am a little behind the scenes in these affairs now, my friend; I *have* to be, you know. And I can assure you that they will go up."

It was piteous to her to see him thus elated by the importance of his editorial position, and pluming himself on his intimate knowledge of matters about which he was so inexperienced as to be absolutely at the mercy of a man like Peretti. But she saw that it was necessary to be cautious.

"His vanity," thought she, "will take alarm if he thinks I am assuming more knowledge of these matters than he has. Heaven help us, what a knowledge to be proud of! And how gladly I would relinquish mine, if I could get back the price I paid for it!" Then she sighed out half aloud, "Ah, poor thing; poor thing!" And it need scarcely be said that this ejaculation did not apply to Mario Masi.

He, meanwhile, reached Miss Baines's old quarters, and was admitted by Mariuccia in her wide-latticed stay bodice and short skirt, who addressed him with a loud and hoarse salutation like a boatswain's hail, and seemed in her hospitable welcome and display of good fellowship to be very near slapping him on the back.

Violet was in the little sitting-room when he entered it. At the sound of the opening door she turned round, sprang up with a little cry, and ran into his arms. There was something so innocent, confiding, and loving in the action, and in her little fluttering cry, "Oh Mario, oh Mario!"—something so expressive of her faith in him and her devotion to him, that he was moved more deeply than was his wont, and pressed his lips on her bright hair as her head rested for a moment against his breast, not only tenderly but reverently. The next moment his glance alighted on Kitty Low,

who had risen from her chair, and stood, with some needlework in her hand, attentively regarding him.

Mario released Violet from his embrace, and whispered to her hurriedly in Italian, "Who is she? What is she doing here?"

Violet raised her blushing face on which some happy tears were shining, and answered him in English, "This is Kitty Low, my aunt's maid. I have mentioned her in my letters, you know. I had forgotten you were there, Kitty, for the moment. I am engaged to marry Captain Masi. I was engaged to him before I went home. But it is a secret for the present from every one. I know you will keep it faithfully."

"I'm not much given to talking anyway, Miss Violet; and when you trust me with a secret you can depend on me," answered Kitty quietly. But she was not unmoved; and she looked again at Masi's face with a keener attention than before.

For his part he was not well pleased at having this stranger forced into his confidence. In the first place, he had very little faith in her silence. In the next place, he objected to feel that he was in her power. She might choose to betray him to Violet's uncle. However, there was no help for it now. And he could not reproach Violet in the first moments of their *réunion* for heedlessly betraying their secret, especially since that betrayal had arisen from an impulse of her strong affection for him.

Kitty discreetly withdrew, saying that she would go and see if Miss Baines wanted her; and the lovers were left alone.

"Why do you have such an ugly woman for your maid?" was Masi's first question when that staid spinster had departed.

"How strange that you should think her so ugly," cried Violet. "To me her face is very pleasant. But she thinks herself plain."

"*Diavolo!* What else can she think?"

"But she is such a good creature, Mario; and so sensible, and——"

"Very likely; but I can't waste the short time I have to stay with you in talking of her."

"Must it be so short, Mario?" asked Violet wistfully. "I hoped that you would be able to stay this evening."

"And what would become of to-morrow's paper?"

As a matter of fact, to-morrow's paper was prepared, so far as he had anything to do with preparing it. But there were the evening's lounging and smoking and gossip to be accomplished; seasoned with the delightful sense that they were "business" done in the interests of the journal, and necessary to keep its editor well up to the course of public opinion.

"I hope you are not working too hard, Mario," said Violet innocently. "You look thinner than when we parted."

It was true. He was thinner, and looked older, and had a more sharp and irritable manner. So little gentle, indeed, was his manner, that Violet felt timid of urging on him her desire to tell her uncle of their engagement. But the desire was strong, and those reasons she had to give for it seemed to her so unanswerable, that she nerved herself to speak. She pointed out that to keep the secret now, when they were all likely to meet frequently, would be impossible without active duplicity, and that both he and she would have to play a part, and to act lies, even if they spoke none. But these representations failed to affect Mario as she had expected. He appeared to look upon them as childish and overstrained, and he said: "Do not, my dear Violetta, give way to what you English call humbug."

Nina Guarini's words recurred to the girl's mind—"Your standard of life is different from his. You would expect what he could not give you, and what he would think you childish for expecting. Your views of many things would be incomprehensible to him, as his would be incomprehensible to you." Violet tried to

put these words aside, but they persistently forced themselves on her memory, and she felt unreasonably angry with Nina for having said them, and unreasonably angry with herself for recalling them just then, and altogether confusedly dispirited.

Mario was too much absorbed in his own reflections to pay much heed to her tell-tale face. After a little pause, he asked her if she knew the extent of her uncle's wealth, and whether he were avaricious, like most rich men. And when she told him of the wedding gift of fifty pounds which she had received, besides her travelling expenses, Mario opened his eyes and ears, and exclaimed, "Fifty pounds? That is more than twelve hundred francs! But he must be a millionnaire, your uncle?"

And then Miss Baines came in; and they agreed that she should introduce Masi to Mr. Higgins as a friend of hers, and they appointed a day for that purpose. And by this time Masi declared that his engagements made it imperatively necessary for him to tear himself away.

CHAPTER XXII.

In due course Nina Guarini made her visit to Mrs. Higgins, and in her quiet way she soon formed a pretty correct judgment of that lady. But Nina found her knowledge of English people and English ways by no means sufficient to enable her to interpret Joshua Higgins as glibly as she interpreted his wife.

"You know Rome already, Madame Higgins?" said Nina after the first greetings had been exchanged.

"Oh *dear* yes!" answered Mrs. Higgins, in a tone expressive of the most profound and intimate acquaintance with the Eternal City. (She had been in Rome once for eight days, including an excursion to Naples,

with a flock of tourists driven through Europe by contract.)

"And I suppose you will be able to play *cicerone* to your husband."

"No, ma'am, no," interposed Mr. Higgins, with dignity. "My wife don't play anything; and if she did, I've something else to do than to listen to her. In my country, ma'am, we're busy—occupied. It is different in Italy, I am led to understand. More play than work here, ma'am."

"I hope you don't dislike the Italians, Mr. Higgins," said Nina, with her pretty, subtle smile.

"I can't say I do, ma'am, having seen so very little of them," answered Mr. Higgins, naïvely.

"Ah, that is very just! You shall give me your opinion by-and-by, will you not?"

Mr. Higgins took this demand quite literally, and made answer that he should be happy to impart his opinion to Madame Guarini as soon as he had formed it; and that in point of fact, he had made that long journey partly to gratify his wife's desire to have his opinion of Rome.

"Ah!" exclaimed Nina in a tone of considerable surprise. Then with a sudden light of comprehension in her face, she said, "I see. You are, then, a student of Roman archæology."

"Not at all, ma'am," answered Uncle Joshua, as contemptuously as though she had accused him of devoting his time to Berlin wool work. "Not at all. But Rome is a place that there has been a good deal of talk about, one way or another. It is what may be called a celebrated place, ma'am. Many persons have cried it up in my presence. But you will understand that that kind of thing doesn't make much impression on a man of my time of life, and with my experience of the world. My wife, for instance, was quite carried away in her descriptions of Rome. The female mind is naturally more easily carried away than ours, owing to a want of ballast, or, since I am talking to a foreigner I may put it more plainly as brains."

"And you might add, Mr. Higgins, by being more sensitive and delicate," put in his wife.

"Very true, Jane Higgins. Sensitiveness and delicacy are appropriate to the female character."

"Our dear Violet, your niece, is very fond of Rome," said Nina. "And Rome is very fond of her,—at least that little bit of Rome which knows her. She is sweet and charming."

"She is, ma'am," assented Uncle Joshua graciously.

"Such a clear, candid nature."

"That, ma'am, runs in my family. The Higginses always hated a lie."

This statement, so far as it concerned himself, was true. Joshua Higgins would have unhesitatingly rejected the most flattering praises if he had thought them to be lies, and would have despised the flatterer. And he would equally have admitted any verdict adverse to his own consummate wisdom, could he have believed it. But then, knowing himself to be so extremely sagacious, such an excellent man of business, so fair a dealer, so steady a church-goer, so liberal a master, so hospitable a host, so generally judicious, experienced, respectable, and respected, it would have seemed to him mere wrong-headed perversity to doubt the sincerity of persons who affirmed those facts, or to credit with veracity those who denied them.

"And what chiefly interests you in Rome, madame?" asked Nina, mindful of her resolution to ingratiate herself if possible with Violet's new aunt. "Are you most fond of antiquities, or pictures, or churches, or scenery? The English are admirers of scenery."

"Oh, I adore scenery, and pictures, and churches, and catacombs, and I am particularly fond of those coloured worsted-work aprons, something like crewel samplers in the days of my—such as I have seen worked by my mamma, sold by those women in peasant costumes. And statues," added Mrs. Higgins, with a sudden reminiscence of the table of contents in her guide-book.

"Ah, you have a truly catholic taste, madame!"

"Well now, ma'am," broke in Mr. Higgins, "since ou have mentioned the word yourself, I will take the opportunity of informing you that I don't approve of the Catholic religion, or rather of the Popish religion, for *we* believe in the Holy Catholic Church, and there it stands in plain English in our Church Service. I don't wish to make you uncomfortable as a member of the Popish religion, which may be suited to foreigners; although," with a burst of conscientiousness as of one unwilling to lead his hearers astray by a weak indulgence, "I *can't* say that I've noticed it make 'em clean and comfortable in their ways so far as I've gone yet. But I'm bound to tell you that my principles are Church of England staunch to the backbone, and Jane Higgins's are the same."

As to this latter point, by the way, he had never made the slightest inquiry, but had assumed it as confidently as that she washed her face and combed her hair.

"I shall not seek to convert you, Mr. Higgins," said Nina, with a smile. Then, to change the subject, she inquired which of the sights of Rome they had been looking at that day.

"Oh, we have revisited some of my favourite haunts," said Mrs. Higgins. "Entwined with poetic memories, where I was wont to wander in days of yore." Mrs. Higgins, when she bore the name of Lucas, had been "personally conducted" through several of the more famous ruins at a smart pace, and conveyed from point to point, together with eleven others of the flock, in a vehicle of the kind familiar to English eyes in connection with school feasts, temperance celebrations, drunken returns from the Derby, and other festive occasions.

"The fact is," said Mr. Higgins, reducing his wife's poetic style to the level of prose, "we have been inspecting the Forum, the Coliseum, and the Baths of Carrycallo." And here Mr. Higgins shook his head,

"Were you not pleased?" asked Nina.

"I will not deceive you, ma'am, I *wasn't*. Not to any such an extent as I'd been led to believe."

"Oh, but then the associations, Mr. Higgins!" exclaimed his wife. "The poetic memories entwined, you know, Mr. Higgins! Look at Byron, for instance! What poetical opinions *he* expressed about—a variety of things in Rome!"

"Allow me, if *you* please, Jane Higgins. Madame Gwarinny was not requiring to hear Lord Byron's opinions,—which so far as I am aware were not of a nature to improve the female mind,—but my opinions. —Well now, ma'am, take the Roman Forum. There's something about it very uncomfortable to an English eye. A want of mellowness, a dustiness, a dryness, a general look of bleached bones and a higgledy-piggledy-ness about the way the retaining fragments of building stand, which no amount of plans and maps in your guide-book can reconcile the English eye to. Nor yet the English intellect."

"The Coliseum?" suggested Nina.

Mr. Higgins again shook his head, but this time rather in sorrow than in anger. "The Coliseum, ma'am," said he, "has been a handsome pile o' building in its time. But in its present condition it reminds me of a mouldy old Stilton with three parts of the inside scooped out and a bit of the rind cut away."

"I believe that St. Peter's will please you better, Mr. Higgins," said Nina.

"I hope it may, ma'am; I hope it may," he replied. But he evidently was not sanguine on the subject.

Before the Signora Guarini went away, she engaged the Higginses to come and spend an evening at her house. "It is quite without ceremony, you know, Madame Higgins," she said. "You must not expect a grand *soirée*."

"Oh, don't mention it, I'm sure," replied Mrs. Higgins, graciously. "I know that you have very interesting persons at your house. Literary persons. I adore literary persons."

"Humph! I'm afraid a good many of 'em are not very correct in their conduct when you get to know 'em," said Mr. Higgins. "It's an idle kind of life, you see; and 'Satan finds some mischief still,'—as you are no doubt aware, ma'am."

"Idle!" echoed Nina. "My dear sir, I assure you that a literary life is anything but idle for those who live by literature. I have known a good many writers, and most of them worked very hard."

"Ay, ay, they tell you so, ma'am, being a lady; and the female mind being easy of belief—not that I altogether object to that, when confined *to* the female mind. But you may depend on it, ma'am, that they're mostly a set of idle vagabonds. Writing a book, now! —why, what is it? You just take a quire of paper, a blotting pad, pen, and ink; you set yourself down at your table, and you—and you write your book! Whereas, the seed and corn dealing business, for instance, requires a grasp of mind, a constant attention to the state of the crops and the markets, a knowledge of book-keeping, and a general diligence and activity, that you probably have no idea of. Writing! I'd write half a dozen books easier than I could get through my half-year's business. You just take your quire of paper, your blotting pad, your pen, and your ink; you set yourself down at your table, and—and you write your book."

On the whole, the Signora Guarini had impressed Mr. Higgins favourably. He pronounced her to be unassuming in her manners, and—so far as he could tell from his brief observation of her—pretty fairly intelligent. Mrs. Joshua Higgins, for her part, had bestowed minute attention on their visitor's attire; and resolved to imitate in her very next new gown the cut of a certain tight-fitting jacket which Nina wore, and which was very becoming to her slender figure.

CHAPTER XXIII.

As Nina Guarini, on leaving the Higginses, was being carried home in her neat, dark green brougham, she ordered the coachman to drive once or twice round the Pincian—that miniature public park with its circumscribed foreground, and almost limitless background; comprising the Eternal City on one hand, and the everlasting hills on the other, and the vast Campagna melting far away into the infinite sea. The whole landscape is steeped in story, saturated with tradition, written over with countless hieroglyphics of the past, from the lovely undulations of its mountain summits, to the uttermost horizon-line of its blue-grey plain. The Pincian Hill was thickly populated. The afternoon was bright and delicious with the scents, and sounds, and sights of Spring. But all that had not attracted the majority of the crowd. The horse-chestnuts were laden with blossoms, the acacias were exquisite in the delicate green of their feathery branches, the Banksian roses, white and yellow, were tumbling over the walls like perfumed flower-cascades in the Sleeping Beauty's garden, arrested in their course until the coming of the Prince should set them free to flow again. But neither leaf nor flower, nor the fresh grass, nor the twittering birds, had anything to do with attracting the human beings who thronged the Pincian. Princes there were, and Princesses, but they did not look at all as if they belonged to a fairy story. Such spells as they dealt in were performed by the *Curato;* and if they had any faith in magic potions, they bought them at the perfumer's shop, in the guise of cosmetics. No, the majority of the crowd on the Pincian that day, like the majority of crowds all over the world, were there because they knew other people would be there.

It was a *festa*, and the band played, and equipages of all kinds were drawn up on the wide gravelled terrace, and pedestrians of all grades strolled about and stared at each other. The Italians are practically the most democratic, as they are the most courteous, of European nations. They have, generally speaking, absolutely none of that left-handed worship of titles and finery which has been known occasionally to manifest itself elsewhere in a violent outcry against them, as being truly so very important that free and equal and fraternal citizens cannot on any account afford to let them alone. The Italian—and especially the Roman—of the poorer classes, habitually assumes that his dignity as a human being is able to take care of itself even against such tremendous odds as a very big painted coat of arms, or a cocked hat with gold lace on it. No doubt much of this simplicity of spirit will disappear with increasing wealth, and by contact with cosmopolitan vulgarity of the expensive kind, which has to be accepted as a *per contra* to set against many good things achieved by Italy in these latter years. Already, indeed, there are symptoms of a change in this respect. But for the present it may be broadly stated that the social accomplishment of "giving one's self airs" languishes in Italy for want of a public opinion to foster it.

So the crowd of pedestrians on the Pincian, and the families crammed five or six together into street cabs, were quite as much at their ease as were the folks in smart carriages, whom they looked at ungrudgingly, and considered to form part of the show which they had a right to expect on a *festa*. Standing at the doors of many carriages were men young and old, singly and in groups, talking to the ladies within. The carriage of the Marchesa del Ciuffo had a small group of men round it. But the smart low phaeton of Madame Xavier was surrounded by a little court of admirers four and five deep, and its fair occupant's clean washed countenance competed successfully with the pigments

of the Marchesa. To be sure Madame Xavier had the advantage of comparative youth. The Del Ciuffo was handicapped with a weight of at least half-a-dozen years more than her rival. And when a woman turns thirty every year tells heavily But the Del Ciuffo was a far handsomer woman than the other, with well-cut features and fine dark eyes; whereas Madame Xavier's outline was irregular, and her light eyes of no colour in particular. But her great attraction consisted in the gay audacity of her speech and manner. She had naturally high spirits, and rattled on with easy joviality, caring little what she laughed at, so that she might but laugh. It was generally understood in the brilliant circles which she adorned, that "you might say anything to Madame Xavier," provided it had the excuse of a joke in it. And this made her very popular, as enabling most men to shine conversationally in her presence; since if wit be not common, coarseness is not rare. And it can, moreover, be acquired by a judicious attention to the best models,—which is not the case with wit. Thus a competition with Madame Xavier for masculine attention was no light matter, as the Marchesa del Ciuffo had found to her chagrin.

The Marchesa's style was languishing and melancholy. She leaned back in her carriage, seeming to find it a severe effort to raise her eyes, or open her lips. But as Nina's brougham rolled smoothly past her, her eyes acquired a spark of vitality, and she turned her head with a sudden movement. Presently Nina approached the barouche of the Princess Carlovingi, with its powdered and silk-stockinged footmen, showy liveries, splendid horses, costly trappings, an immense coat of arms painted on the panels, and the Princess and two of her daughters sitting inside it in gorgeous array. Nina's sight was as keen as a hawk's, and she saw the Princess bend down as the brougham drew near, and say a word to a flaxen-headed young man who stood leaning his folded arms on her carriage door, and whom Nina recognized as Ciccio Nasoni.

Similarly Madame Xavier honoured her with a broad stare; and the old Princess Nasoni, perched up in the family coach, knitted her brows and gazed at the dark green brougham with a meditative look.

These, and other symptoms observed by the Signora Guarini, confirmed the knowledge she had already acquired in other ways, that the Pontine Marshes Company, and she herself as being supposed to be connected with the rulers of it, were attracting a great deal of public attention. One singular point was that every one assumed Beppe Guarini to be the chief personage in the Company. There seems to be an ineradicable instinct in human nature to set up some one individual as a kind of shorthand sign, or symbolic epitome of certain subjects. Thus as in London at one time all stories of practical jokes were fathered on Theodore Hook, so in Rome the name of Beppe Guarini was equivalent to an "abstract and brief chronicle" of all money speculations: and every share list, from railways and municipal loans to the latest scheme for extending the blessings of the tramway to the top of Soracte, was supposed to emanate from the brain, and to enrich the pocket, of Beppe Guarini. These ready-made conclusions save the trouble of thinking, or investigating facts. And by dint of being constantly accepted, or at least allowed to pass unchallenged, they acquire the authority of dogmas. "Oh, but everybody knows," is the inevitable corollary to "Oh, but everybody says." And when the proceeding is reversed, and "everybody's" knowledge precedes "everybody's" affirmation instead of following it, the world will have made an important progress—and a great many revolutions on its axis!

On the afternoon of that same day when Nina Guarini had been the cynosure of very unneighbourly eyes on the Pincian, Don Francesco Nasoni, Duca di Pontalto, paid a visit to his grandmother. That exemplary lady had been much hurt by his defection from the good cause, but she had been careful not to break with him formally, having arrived (although by a

different road) at the same conclusion with which Nina had comforted Prince Massimo: "He will come back to the fold. You will see he will come back to the fold." Nor had Don Francesco, familiarly known as Ciccio, ever ceased to visit the Princess from time to time. We have seen that even during the high tide of his democratic aspirations he felt bound to present himself at a *soirée* in Palazzo Carlovingi in obedience to his grandmother's behest. And, perhaps, the period was now at hand which Mario Masi had prophesied, when Ciccio would marry, and have his children educated by the Jesuits. At any rate he trod the dim and chilly corridor that led to his grandmother's apartment with an accustomed foot, and presented himself before the Princess with his usual lack-lustre imperturbability.

The old woman's private sanctum was much more like the office of an impoverished notary than the sitting-room of a noble Roman matron. It was lofty, as were all the rooms of that suite; and had a vaulted ceiling painted with some dismal allegory in time-darkened *fresco* whose hovering developments of muscular Paganism were happily too far aloft to impress themselves vividly on the spectator. Its flooring was of unglazed bricks, imparting an Arctic chill to the lower extremities in winter, and in summer affording good cover to innumerable hordes of fleas, that must have lived not only in the dust, but on the dust, for they had little other sustenance. It was now, however, the middle season, when wintry frosts were past and gone, and the lively population in the crevices between the bricks had not entered into full summer activity. The walls were stencilled in a dark blue pattern on a raw blue ground. (They had doubtless been hidden by rich hangings once upon a time.) In one wall the space not taken up by the entrance door was entirely filled by a coarsely-varnished deal press containing papers. Another wall was broken by a window looking into the gravelled court-yard, and darkened by the shadow of the mediæval Tor Nasoni; and underneath this window was a miser-

ably small iron stove poking its shabby snout of a chimney out through the lower pane, where a tin plate had been substituted for glass. In the third wall rose the imposing doorway with marble jambs and lintel, and the Nasoni arms in stucco above it, which led into the Princess's bedchamber. And against the fourth wall stood a long sofa covered with faded yellow damask—a spindle-shanked, narrow-seated, inhospitable sofa, as ever was produced by an artificer of the first Napoleonic Empire.

But above it hung an object which was in singular contrast with the atmosphere of mental and bodily starvation pervading everything else—a magnificent picture of the Venetian school, perhaps an original, perhaps a copy, in any case a superb work of art—representing the Madonna with the Divine Infant on her knee, behind her a lovely landscape, and at her feet two exquisite child angels singing and playing instruments. The effect of the glowing colour, the sweetness, warmth, and beauty of this painting seen in the midst of the surrounding desert of stencilled wall and brick floor, and beneath that lowering canopy of anatomical distortions, was like looking from the loophole of a dungeon into God's sunlighted world. In front of the sofa was spread a narrow strip of common carpet. In the centre of the room stood a square table covered with a green baize cloth, on which were ranged in order several piles of yellow papers, a huge pewter inkstand, a pounce-box, three quill pens, a book of devotions, a photograph of Pope Pius the Ninth in a cheap gilt frame, and an antique crucifix in silver and ivory of fine workmanship. Near the table was an armchair of the same yellow damask as the sofa, and close to it a straw bassock for the feet.

Here sat Donna Teresa Filomena Maria Giuseppina, Princess Nasoni. A meagre old woman, with a skin like the parchment of a drum, handsome features, and dark eyes which were still brilliant under habitually frowning eyebrows. She wore a jet black wig, which in some degree vulgarized her physiognomy that would otherwise have been strikingly picturesque. And over

the black wig was tied a kerchief of black lace meeting under the chin. Her dress was also black, and plain even to sordidness. When her grandson entered, she was casting up a row of figures in a little paper-covered account-book; and as she looked up at him over her spectacles she kept her finger on the point she had reached in the column, and motioned him with the other hand to wait until she should have finished adding up the sum. Having done so, she took off her glasses, and held out her lean and wrinkled hand, half covered by a black silk mitten. Don Francesco took it, and formally touched it with his lips.

"What do you want, Ciccio?" asked the old woman in a deep, strong voice, strangely at variance with the fragility of her appearance.

"I came to speak to you about the Pontine Marshes property," said Ciccio. "I think it is time to take some steps about selling."

The Princess evidently knew all about it. She reflected for an instant, and then said, "Do you know precisely how much of the property these people would want to buy? Have you seen any maps or plans?"

"No, I don't know precisely. But Don Silvestro knows. He says it lies between Lestra di Campolungo and Mattoccia."

"And Pietro? What does he think about it?"

Pietro was the Prince Carlovingi whom Donna Teresa had known from childhood, and whom she never called by any other name.

"He thinks I had better sell the land now."

"Humph! Is that all?"

"Oh well, the Prince hasn't done badly."

"Has he bought any shares?"

Ciccio shook his head emphatically.

"Then what has he done?"

"Directly he dropped a word about the Company here and there it had a good effect. If people think he is interested in it, that will do as well for us as if he had bought."

"But if none of our people have shares, all this crying up of the Company will only benefit the Revolutionists," observed the Princess, watching her grandson very keenly.

"I've got to sell my land," returned Ciccio in his slow guttural tones. "The more they prosper the better terms they can afford to give. In fact, things have gone so far now that Don Silvestro says he thinks they *must* take the land at any price."

"And when that is done——?"

Ciccio made no further answer than an expressive shrug.

"Humph!" grunted the Princess. "It seems a pity, too! Would it not be possible to get the thing into good hands, and keep the Revolutionists out of it altogether?"

"Out of the question. You must have Government support, and you wouldn't get it."

"Ah, *Santa Madonna!* How can you have anything to say to such wretches! Atheists, incendiaries, robbers, traitors——"

"Oh, I'm a Liberal in politics, you know," answered Ciccio with a sort of dogged calm.

The old Princess made an impatient movement with her hands, which she then clasped forcibly together, and bending her frowning brows on her grandson, said gloomily, "I will have another *novena* said for you, Ciccio."

"I think," pursued the young man quite unmoved, "that I had better see Guarini. He's the leading person in the matter." For the Duke of Pontalto shared the common persuasion that no association for financial purposes could exist in Rome without Beppe Guarini's forming part of it.

"That's the man with a handsome wife," said the Princess. "I saw her to-day."

"She's not handsome. Too thin. But she's clever," replied Ciccio.

At this moment a servant entered and communicated that his Excellency the Prince Nasoni desired to know if the Princess would be pleased to receive him. The grandmother and grandson looked at each other doubt-

fully, but when the servant added, "His Excellency is at the door," the Princess said in a loud voice, "Tell my son that I shall be very glad to see him." And almost immediately the Prince entered. He was dressed with his usual taste and care, and looked a strikingly handsome and elegant man; not the less so by contrast with his son, whose appearance and demeanour were neither handsome nor elegant. The Prince advanced to his mother, and kissed her hand with a graceful deference; very different from Ciccio's formal salute. Then turning to the young man with an air of cool condescension, he extended to him the tips of his well-gloved fingers, and slightly saying, "How does the Duke of Pontalto?" seated himself in the chair from which his son had arisen when he entered.

"And how are you, my dear mother?" he said after a short silence.

"I am not very well in body, Massimo; but that is to be looked for at my age. And I am a good deal troubled in mind. Who can be otherwise in the times we live in?"

"I was in hopes that there were symptoms of something good being about to happen, even in these times; at least for our family. I thought to find you alone, and"——

"Shall I go away?" asked Ciccio, who had remained standing.

"That is not necessary," answered his father carelessly. "Unless, that is to say, your grandmother desires to get rid of you;" and here the Prince bowed to her.

"Sit down, Ciccio," said the old Princess, as though she had been speaking to a child. And Ciccio obeyed, with a more than usually sullen stare in his pale eyes.

"What were you saying, my son, about better times being in store for our family?" asked the Princess.

"My dear mother, I know nothing. But I have heard a rumour of an alliance in prospect between the Duke of Pontalto and Donna Ermengarda Carlovingi.

And I should suppose that would be considered an auspicious event."

The Princess looked slightly disturbed, and answered quickly, "Nothing is settled, Massimo. Of course nothing could be settled without consulting you."

"Oh, why not? You are old-fashioned, my dear mother. The Duke of Pontalto, who I believe has an extended acquaintance among them, will tell you that the gentry who at present hold sway here look upon filial obedience and respect as an obsolete prejudice. How, indeed, can any father in Rome expect to be treated with due observance when the Father and Sovereign of us all is despoiled, and a prisoner in his own city!" And here the Prince took out his cambric handkerchief, and filled the room with a waft of delicate perfume.

Ciccio considered it to be too bad that this elderly spendthrift, who had wasted the property which ought to have descended to his heirs, and had filled the city with scandalous stories of his extravagance and dissipation, should expect as much deference as though he had been a model father, with a talent for economy in the interests of his son, and no bill at his tailor's. And the young man's brow grew so lowering that the Princess made him a sign to go away. "You need not stay, Ciccio," said she. "I want to talk to your father." And when her grandson silently departed with a cold bow, she laid her hand on Massimo's arm, and said in a confidential tone, "My son, let us be careful how we handle this matter. A breath may overthrow all my labours; and I have slaved to bring it about, for such a marriage would be the saving of Ciccio."

"Really!" said the Prince, who still preserved an injured air of *hauteur*, and to say truth didn't exhibit any absorbing interest in the saving of Ciccio. "I should have thought he might have found a Duchess of Pontalto who didn't squint!"

"Of course there would be no difficulty in finding a wife for him. But suppose he had taken it into his

head to ally himself with some of those people of the Revolution! Listen. This is how the case stands." And then the Princess proceeded briefly to tell her son, how that by various means at her disposal she had ascertained that the Carlovingis were desirous of seeing Ermengarda married; and how she had further ascertained that they would not object to her becoming Duchess of Pontalto; and how the idea having been very dexterously presented to Ciccio, that young gentleman had not shown himself averse to it. But the Princess went on to say that matters had by no means been brought to a definite conclusion as yet, Ciccio being a somewhat difficult fish to play, and very fully conscious of his value in the matrimonial market. Pietro Carlovingi, however, had displayed a very friendly interest in Ciccio's affairs, even to the point of advising him as to the disposal of some of his property.

Prince Massimo Nasoni pricked up his ears at this, and wished to hear all about it. And when his mother proceeded to tell him that Ciccio would certainly be able to realize a large sum by selling to a certain company a large tract of land which was almost valueless as it stood, the Prince's countenance expressed by turns a variety of conflicting emotions; amongst which amused satisfaction undoubtedly predominated. "Ha!" said he. "Then it is a portion of the San Gemignano property which Ciccio proposes to sell?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the terms of my marriage contract, mother?" asked the Prince, stroking his moustache.

"Not accurately. Your father and old San Gemignano arranged it chiefly."

"But old San Gemignano got hold of me at the last moment, and persuaded me to consent to a clause that was very much in their favour. You don't remember that, mother?"

"I remember something of it. However, it don't much matter; since Ciccio is his mother's heir, all the

property comes to our family in one way or another. But what makes you speak of it now?"

"I suppose the talk of this marriage put it into my head. Ah, Ciccio is sure to make a good bargain when his turn comes. I am told he has great business talents. Only one thing surprises me a little; that Pietro Carlovingi should have no objection to so very —enlightened and Liberal a son-in-law."

"We must have faith, Massimo, that the boy will see his errors and return to the right way. And, after all, we must remember it might have been worse."

"Might it? Well, I suppose he *might* have taken to robbing on the highway. But, really I think things are bad enough. His chosen associates are avowed socialists and republicans!"

"Yes; but, Massimo," and here the old Princess laid her hand emphatically on her son's arm, "Ciccio has never gone to the Quirinal."

CHAPTER XXIV

ALTHOUGH the course of the *Tribune of the People* was not running smooth, Masi was still a newspaper editor and a political writer, and a possible subject for the carrying out of various schemes; and he had his parasites. He was not without friends either, as we know. But the friends for the most part lacked one indispensable qualification for making their society agreeable; they did not believe in the *Tribune of the People*. Now the parasites believed in it to a man. To hear them one might have thought not only that Rome thrilled responsive to the leading articles of that journal, but that the public opinion of Europe was swayed by it as tides beneath the moon. They had inexhaustible stories of the startling effects produced by the *Tribune* on this or that exalted personage. The

Pope was confidently stated to peruse it eagerly from end to end every morning before breaking his fast. (Which considering the tone he was habitually alluded to in it, argued either a very stoic strain of philosophy, or a surprising thirst for information on the part of His Holiness.) As to the august inhabitants of the Quirinal, it was indubitable—according to the parasites—that His Majesty King Humbert and all his Ministers exhibited the liveliest satisfaction at every severe hit of the *Tribune* against the Opposition; and that, however appearances might be to the contrary, the Sovereign of Italy entirely concurred in the *Tribune's* democratic sentiments, and had been known to quote them to the confusion of Deputies X., Y., and Z., who were Conservatives of the most prejudiced and pig-tailed type. This was gratifying, but it did not sell the paper.

But amongst all the backers, partisans, and hangers-on, there were several who were full of magnificent schemes for making the fortune of the *Tribune* and every one connected with it. Their favourite conjuring word was "a combination." No Arabian *Sesame* ever opened the door to greater wonders than the "combination" was to reveal to the editor of the *Tribune* if once it could be effected. If the ex-Minister Sfogo could only be got to come into the combination, and the ex-Minister Nogo could only be kept out of it, all would be well. Again, if the party of the Honourable Deputy for Camiciarossa could be induced to make a "combination" with the party of the Honourable Deputy for Cartabianca, and if both parties would subscribe a handsome sum for the support of the *Tribune* (which would be an extremely advantageous speculation for them if they could be brought to see it from the right point of view), brilliant results would immediately follow. Or once more, if certain of their Excellencies who at present held portfolios would make a "combination" to devote a portion of the funds at their disposal to subsidizing the *Tribune* and furnishing it with the latest and most authentic intelligence from

their respective departments, the Government would obtain a fulcrum on which to rest a lever of enormous power.

But there was one man who privately besieged Masi with schemes of a less political and more personal kind. This was a somewhat remarkable personage. His name was—or he said it was—Smith-Müller. He called himself a Servian subject, but of mixed English and German extraction; and his visiting card bore this inscription in the French language: "Alexis Smith-Müller. *Colonel en retraite*. Bela Palanka, Serbie." He was a stout tall man, speaking several European languages with great fluency. He had a red bloated face, dark twinkling eyes with a look of restless cunning in them, grizzled hair closely cropped in military fashion, and heavy moustaches, which were chameleon-like in their changes of hue, from deep black to a rusty grey, according as he took heed to renew their dye at the due season, or neglected to do so:—the latter state of things being the most frequent. If there was one characteristic which distinguished Colonel Smith-Müller's manner more than another, it was frankness. He was frank to the verge of *brusquerie*,—and beyond it. He had lived in many countries, and professed himself a Citizen of the World. He had also, he said, seen a considerable amount of military service, chiefly in the Eastern parts of Europe; and he was a strong partisan of Liberal institutions.

Masi had met Colonel Smith-Müller at a *café* which he was in the habit of frequenting. The Colonel was very often there in the company of an Englishman. The two, it appeared, had travelled from Brindisi together: the Englishman being on his way home from India, and the Servian just arrived from Greece, where he had been, as he informed Masi, on private business connected with the inheritance of a deceased sister. For it was part of the Colonel's habitual frankness to volunteer a great many details about his family and connections, which appeared to be of a truly

cosmopolitan character; and to explain his goings and comings as though he were not perfectly at liberty to visit any part of the world he pleased without giving an account of his movements. Perhaps it was the inevitable result of this confiding candour in himself that the Colonel was very inquisitive about other people's affairs. He would ask point-blank questions with an innocent air as though he were doing the most natural thing in the world. But it was noticeable that if he did not bring down his answer at the first shot, so to speak, he never pressed an inquiry indiscreetly, but accepted a hint to desist from it with the utmost good-humour. Since, however, his English fellow-traveller had no motive for concealing his name and business, Colonel Smith-Muller soon learned that he was called William Chester, that he was a civil engineer by profession, that he had a good berth in British India, and that he was going to England for a short holiday after an absence of seven years. This Mr. William Chester was a young man of about thirty, with a powerful, heavily-built frame, a pleasant sunburnt face, and mild, honest grey eyes. His voice and manner had a peculiar gentle quietude, and his movements, generally rather slow, were curiously expressive of latent strength. Masi first spoke to him when Chester was in some difficulty at the *café* for want of an Italian word; and after that they always greeted each other in a friendly manner. But the acquaintance stopped there.

Colonel Smith-Müller, on the contrary, soon improved his acquaintance with the editor of the *Tribune* to the point of frequenting his office constantly, and offering him a variety of suggestions for making money, as has been said. Such was the fertility of the Colonel's genius, that he offered to allow Mr. William Chester to share in some of his schemes. But that dull Briton failed to profit by these generous offers. One favourite idea of the Colonel's was to buy forage for cavalry cheap in Italy, and sell it dear in England to

the authorities at the Horse Guards. Thousands of pounds were to be made by the transaction; he only wanted some means of getting at the proper persons in London. Chester had been in India. Surely he must know some military man who knew other military men, and so on step by step until they came to the right one. He should have his percentage on the sale; being required merely (since the Colonel happened for the moment to be out of funds) to advance a sum as earnest-money to the Italian growers of hay. And, even putting the percentage at a modest figure, he could not fail to pocket a handsome profit. When that failed, the Colonel inquired if Mr. Chester had not some acquaintances among the members of the Indian Government, as he (Colonel Smith-Müller) had, by an extraordinary and romantic train of circumstances, come into the possession of documents revealing certain Russian intrigues in the East, for which documents the British authorities would undoubtedly be willing to pay a large price, could he but get a hearing from them. When that failed, he asked in a careless and casual manner whether Chester would put his hand to a bill for a particular friend of his (the Colonel's), a nobleman of princely rank, who was travelling *incognito* and chanced to find himself short of money in one of the first hotels in Rome. When that failed, he burst into a jovial laugh, slapped Chester on the back, declared he was the most original and delightful fellow he had met for many a day, and borrowed five francs to pay a cab fare, finding to his great surprise that he had forgotten to put his purse in his pocket.

But in Mario Masi he found a listener more favourably inclined to profit by his talents. Although a stranger in Rome, the Colonel was well acquainted with Italy. He had visited that country at various interesting epochs in her history, and had been intimate with several of her leading statesmen and patriots, who were, unfortunately, now dead, or they might have been appealed to for confirmation. He had been a

bosom friend of Mazzini and a confidant of Count Cavour; and possessed, he said, curious information about the secret correspondence of every European Cabinet with the Italian Government, from the year 1859 downwards. However that might be, it was certain that he soon made himself familiar with the current gossip of Rome, spoken and printed, and he was diligent in reporting it to Mario Masi. It has been said that the Colonel was remarkably frank; and, indeed, he always said so himself. He bestowed an immense deal of frankness on Masi. One of his frankest complaints against Masi was that the latter did not understand how to make the most of his position.

"*Que diable!*" the polyglot Colonel would explain. "You have the ball at your foot. You ought to be a millionnaire—a billionnaire! Look at the fellows riding in their coaches who haven't brains enough to be your errand boys! *La carrière ouverte aux talents!* I'm no worshipper of Napoleon—too great a Liberal—hate the whole breed of them! But there, he had reason on his side. *La carrière ouverte aux talents!* That's a democratic sentiment, *mon Capitaine.*"

With all his liberality, however, Colonel Smith-Müller had one or two strong prejudices. He disliked and mistrusted Beppe Guarini to an extraordinary degree. He did not know him personally, not at all—had never set eyes on him in his life. But his judgment of Guarini, founded on circumstantial evidence, was profoundly unfavourable, and he constantly warned Masi against putting any trust in him. The Colonel had scraped acquaintance with Gino Peretti, and he found Gino prepared to agree with him to some extent on this point. To be sure, Peretti did not abuse his friend unreservedly. But he acknowledged—with that reluctance with which a friend's shortcomings must ever be acknowledged—that Beppe Guarini had one or two weaknesses. The chiefest of them was, perhaps, a blind belief in his wife's talents. For his

part, he (Gino Peretti) never knew any good come of letting women meddle in matters beyond their tether, which should be strictly limited to domestic and household affairs. If the husband happened to be in the oil trade, the tether might, of course, be extended to a knowledge of the cultivation of olive-trees, and the best and most economical methods of pressing their berries, together with a keen intelligence as to the favourable moment for selling or holding. But these were unimportant variations in a great theory, and every man could make them to suit his own particular case. And here Colonel Smith-Müller went far beyond Peretti. In fact, he became so vituperative that Masi stopped him with a sharp word or two, bidding him remember that the Signora Guarini was his friend, and that he had the highest admiration and respect for her. The Colonel drew back at once, excused himself for any unduly strong expressions he might have used by the fact (undoubted in itself) of his having had a glass or two more than was good for him, and embraced with effusion his "noble and chivalrous friend," a proceeding which would have been pleasanter if the Colonel's consumption of cognac had been more parsimonious, and his consumption of soap less so.

Masi offered to introduce him at Casa Guarini. "You'll repent all your blasphemies against La Nina if once you see her and talk with her," said Masi. "Come, I'm going there to-night. Let me take you. You will meet men there whom you would like to know."

But the Colonel excused himself. He was a rough soldier, unused for many years to society, although there had been a time when the most brilliant saloons in Europe had been open to him. But all that was past and gone. And no arguments would induce him to set foot in the Guarinis' house, nor even to meet Beppe elsewhere. "Forgive me, my dear, noble young friend," said the Colonel, "but there are certain stern principles I have never paltered with. That may be

the reason that you see me a poor man to-day, or it may not. No matter. I have made it a rule through life never to give my hand in friendship to a man I cannot respect."

CHAPTER XXV

In considering the prospects of her young friend, Nina Guarini sometimes had sanguine moments, in which she persuaded herself that Mr. Higgins might be induced to bestow such a dowry on his niece as would place her above want in the event (which Nina foresaw) of Masi's losing the whole of his slender patrimony. Violet was not extravagant nor ambitious, and one could still live on very modest means in Italy. Masi even might obtain some employment sufficient to satisfy his self-respect that he was not dependent on his wife's money. Then, again, her spirits would sink, and she would be able to see no escape for him from the tangle of responsibilities in which he had involved himself. "Ah, if he had not resigned his commission!" said Nina to herself. "Soldiering is the trade he knows. And, perhaps, of all trades it is the one best suited to him; for in the army orders must be obeyed, and there is no opportunity for dawdling between two courses and then choosing the wrong one in a hurry, as he is almost certain to do when left to himself."

From her husband Nina learned that Gino Peretti had resolved to withdraw all money support from the paper, and had advised Masi to give it up, but that Masi persisted in endeavouring to carry it on. And Guarini declared he had no idea how the *Tribune* subsisted, and got published from day to day. He might have made a shrewd guess, and he might even have known with some certainty all the shifts and expedients, the risings and fallings of the financial

thermometer, which attended the issue of that unprosperous print, had he thought it worth while to investigate them. But he did not think it worth while. Mario Masi was a profoundly uninteresting personage to him. Guarini was what is called an easy-going sort of man. He had not much rancour in him, and in any case he never allowed private resentments to interfere with business. But so far as he had any active feeling at all towards Masi he rather disliked him, thinking his manner conceited, and somewhat pretentious. Moreover, Beppe thought that his wife wasted more sympathy and interest than were needful on the ex-Captain. It must be understood that Beppe was not jealous in the ordinary sense of the word, but he felt irritated at seeing "so much fuss made about Masi," as he phrased it to himself, just as he might have been irritated at seeing his wife spoil a child or pamper a lap-dog. As to its all being done for the sake of the little English girl, that was very well, and Beppe believed it. But he was not at all sure that Masi did not set down somewhat of the Signora Nina's kindness to the score of his own personal merits and attractions. Beppe would have liked to assure him in the clearest manner that the Signora Nina cared not one straw for him or his *beau yeux*, or his military swagger, that was all. But he was not jealous—not the least in the world.

Things had already gone so badly with the *Tribune* that Masi had tasted the bitterness of being rudely dunned for money which he was unable to pay. He had attempted, urged by necessity, to gain the support of certain political leaders of his party. Such arrangements were not unheard of. But it was late to make the effort. The *Tribune* was not successful enough to be tempting. However, his overtures had been received in one or two quarters. In the midst of this came the sudden rise of the Pontine Marshes shares, and a corresponding rise in Masi's hopes and spirits. He was believed to be a larger holder than was the fact, and the *Tribune*, which had always upheld the com-

pany, was credited with a great deal of its advance in public estimation. The political personages appeared likely to make up Masi's negotiations seriously, and creditors began to bend their backs and unbend their brows with a lively sense of benefits to come.

It was during this gleam of sunshine that Masi first made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Higgins. Miss Baines, it may be remembered, had made an appointment to introduce him to Uncle Joshua. But before that could come off they met in the house of Nina Guarini. There was a large gathering. Mario arrived late, as was his custom. Nina descried him almost immediately on his arrival, and beckoning him out of the tea-room, led him round by another way into the study, which was empty. "The Higginses are here," she said. "Poor little Violet has been so nervous and anxious all the evening. She asked me, almost as soon as she arrived, if you were coming, and I was obliged to answer that I thought it doubtful, as you had not honoured us very often of late. Oh, yes, I know; 'business of the *Tribune*,'—'Affairs of the nation?' Why, you look quite bright—like your old self! *Tant mieux!* What has happened? Pontine shares going up? Ah, sell, *caro mio!* Sell to-morrow—to-night, if you can."

Involuntarily Masi recalled some of Colonel Smith-Müller's insinuations. Was it so clear, he had asked, that the Signora Guarini was always disinterested in her advice? And even if the lady's motives were excellent, might she not be a tool in the hands of her husband? Might not he desire to injure a rival journalist and a rising man? Masi was half ashamed of himself for thinking of these words, but he did think of them. He was relieved when Nina, giving him a little push on the shoulder, said "*Basta!* No more business for to-night. Go and captivate the old Higgins, and make Violet's pretty eyes brighten at the sight of your good-for-nothing visage," and so dismissed him.

Making his way into the drawing-room, the first person whom he saw was Miss Baines. Her uncle and his wife were yonder, sitting at the end of the room, she told him. She would introduce him to them immediately And Violet was there also, but had just gone into the tea-room with her cousin. Oh, had not Captain Masi heard? It was quite a curious story. Fancy Violet's cousin—or, at any rate, second cousin—having chanced to go to the very same boarding-house where Mr. and Mrs. Higgins were staying, and having made their acquaintance before he found out that they were relations of his own! That was Mrs. Higgins, in the lilac satin gown. But he had better be introduced to Uncle Joshua first. Would Captain Masi come now? Miss Baines was nervous and fluttered, and walked off hurriedly towards the end of the room, giving Masi no time for further questioning.

They advanced to where Mr. Higgins sat in a large arm-chair, haranguing old Giorgi (specially told off by Nina for the service), and abating no whit of his habitual self-assertion in the midst of a scene so new to him. There could be no better proof of the sincerity of Uncle Joshua's good opinion of himself than his demeanour under these circumstances. The least consciousness of humbug—or even a grain of self-distrust—would have weakened him. But his conscience was clear of any attempt to appear what he was not. To appear what he was sufficed to Uncle Joshua; and must also, in his judgment, suffice to impress all beholders with respect.

"This is my friend, Captain Masi, Uncle Joshua, whom I've spoken to you about," said Betsy Baines, with even more than her usual timidity in addressing her uncle.

"How do you do, sir?" said Mr Higgins, holding out his hand. "Why, Lor' bless me, sir; you're quite a young man."

"Alas, not very young!" answered Masi with his winning smile.

"Yes, yes, you are. Quite a young man. My niece, Miss Baines here, said you were retired from the army. And I expected to see an elderly gentleman past active service."

"I didn't intend—" stammered Miss Baines nervously. "I'm very sorry——"

"Nothing to be sorry about, Betsy. I dare say Captain Marsy don't feel it much of a misfortune not to be an old gentleman with grey hair. I suppose you didn't like a military life, sir?"

"I wanted to improve my fortunes, Mr. Higgins, and the army is not a good road for making money."

"Well, I suppose not. And what business have you taken up since you left the army?"

"I am at present engaged in editing a newspaper—"

"Wheugh! Editing a newspaper! Well now, I shouldn't have thought that was a good road for making money any more than the army,—at least not in these parts."

"Oh, but I have other methods,—commercial speculation. I have a great respect for commerce, Mr. Higgins,—like the English nation. The English are a great commercial people," said Masi, thinking he was paying an irresistible compliment.

"The English nation, sir," answered Mr. Higgins, "can do pretty well whatever they've a mind to. But it don't follow that every one can imitate 'em. However, I hope you'll succeed with your speculations, I'm sure."

"May I have the honour to be presented to Mrs. Higgins?" asked Masi, a little thrown out by this unexpected reply.

"You may, certainly: and Mrs. Higgins will be happy to make your acquaintance. I'll introduce you to her directly. There she sits. You see that young gentleman she's talking to? He's a Dook they tell me."

"Yes. I know him."

"Do you? And he *is* a Dook, is he? Well now, tell me; is he always as low in his spirits as he seems to be this evening?"

"He appears to me to be much as usual."

"Does he? Then I'll tell you what I should recommend for him; a good nourishing plain diet, exercise in the open air, and sea-bathing. There must be a sad want of stamina for a young fellow to look and move like that at his age. But, for that matter, I don't know what the constitutions of the present day are made of. Look at me! Over seventy years old, sir; and not in bed with a day's illness for more than a quarter of a century."

The thought darted into Masi's mind that waiting for an inheritance from this old gentleman might be an intolerably tedious business, and that he had far better give Violet whatever he meant her to have, at once, and have done with it. Then Mr. Higgins rose up from his chair, and, going up to his wife, said, "This gentleman is Captain Marsy, a friend of my niece, Miss Baines. My wife, Mrs. Joshua Higgins."

That lady was in a high state of elation, and had been playing off her finest airs of elegance for the Duke of Pontalto's benefit, to such an extent that Ciccio sat staring at her, for the most part in silence, not in the least degree comprehending the bearing of half her speeches, and thinking her the most bewildering person he had ever met with in all his life. But unconscious of his state of mind regarding her, Mrs. Higgins talked on, rolling her eyes, shrugging her buxom shoulders, fanning herself, languishing, smiling, bridling, and, above all, talking, talking, talking, until the diamond drops in her ears (a wedding gift from Mr. Higgins) quivered again with her eloquence. She had been prepared beforehand to give any friend of Miss Baines's a very condescending and cool reception. But she changed her mind a little on seeing Masi, and she changed it a great deal on observing that the Duke of Pontalto saluted Captain Masi very civilly, and Captain Masi saluted the Duke of Pontalto very distantly. "Oh, you are already acquainted with his Grace!" she said with a girlish giggle. "I was going

to present you." But "his Grace," after one long last stare, which apparently failed to give him any distinct enlightenment as to what sort of queer creature this was whom *la Nina* had got hold of, relapsed into apathetic melancholy, gave a somnolent bow, and slowly shambled away.

"Delightful person!" exclaimed Mrs. Higgins to Masi, as the Duke of Pontalto turned his back. "Have you known him long?"

"Who—Ciccio Nasoni? Oh yes. That is to say one sees him about, you know."

"Ah, true, of course. In the *monde*, naturally. I suppose you go a good deal into the *monde?*"

Masi said "Yes," at a venture, and looked about impatiently for Violet. He was curious to see the cousin; and, in some dim unacknowledged way, a little resentful at the existence of a cousin of whom he had never heard.

"What do you mean by the *mongd*, Jane Higgins?" asked her spouse, gravely.

"The *beau monde* of course, my dear. The fashionable world," she answered with a playful tap of her fan.

"Oh! I am not acquainted with foreign languages, myself, Captain Marsy, having been occupied with more important business all my life. But my wife, Mrs. Joshua Higgins, she is up to any amount of *parly-voo.*"

"Flatterer!" exclaimed Mrs. Joshua Higgins, with another playful poke of her fan, and a giggle. "Don't believe him, Captain Masi! But about the Duke—you called him by his Christian name, did you not?"

"Oh, most people do that. He's a sort of character like Stenterello. I suppose you know Stenterello?"

"Well I—n—no; I almost fancy not; but, having travelled a good deal, you see, my acquaintance is so large that I—I hardly know," answered Mrs. Higgins, in some confusion, for she saw in her husband's eye an intention of presently inquiring to know what was meant by "Stenterello;" and, despite her residence in

Florence, and some hazy associations with the name, she felt herself quite unable to tell him. But, at this moment, Violet entered the room on the arm of a gentleman; Masi started from his seat with a smothered exclamation, advanced towards them, and shook hands with the stranger. It was perhaps well for Violet that the general attention was thus diverted from her face, which suddenly flushed from brow to chin on seeing Masi, and then grew pale.

"What, do you know each other?" asked Mr. Higgins. And Miss Baines clasped her hands and exclaimed, "How very strange, isn't it?" And Mrs. Higgins, fanning herself, languidly observed that these coincidences might make a sensitive mind superstitious.

"Why I don't think our knowing each other so very strange," said the new-comer with a smile. "For we met in the most commonplace and every-day manner, at a *café*, where I was indebted to Captain Masi's courtesy for helping my lame Italian out of a hobble."

"This is Violet's cousin, Mr. William Chester," said Miss Baines; and then the two men shook hands over again.

"I didn't know that Miss Moore had a cousin," observed Masi.

"I scarcely knew it myself," said Violet.

"It is very kind in Miss Moore to admit the cousinship," said Chester. "I'm afraid it's only a far-away one."

"Oh no, not so far away," struck in Miss Baines. "Violet's father and your father were first cousins. Mr. Moore's aunt Sarah married a Chester, and I have often heard him speak——"

"That will do, Betsy, that will do," interposed Mr. Higgins. "There are times and seasons for everything. It won't interest Captain Marsy to hear all that rigmarole about people he don't know and don't care about." Uncle Joshua was alive to the probability that strangers might not be interested in the family genealogy of Moores and Chesters. Had it been Higginses, it would have been a different matter.

"You didn't expect to see me of all people here to-night?" said Chester, turning to Masi.

"Well, no; simply because you mentioned that you had no acquaintances in Rome."

"The fact is, I came under the wing of Miss Baines. She kindly got me the invitation."

"As to that, my dear Mr. Chester, you might have come with *us*," said Mrs. Higgins majestically, with some intention of snubbing Betsy Baines, and putting her in the background. But upon this, Mr. Higgins, perceiving symptoms of that tendency in Jane Higgins to "take too much upon herself," which it was his mission to correct, contradicted her in a loud voice. "No, no, Mrs. Higgins! Not at all. Don't you make any false pretences. I'm a stranger to Madame Gwarinny, and I shouldn't think of taking it on *my*self —let alone my wife—to bring any one to her house. Miss Baines is different. My niece, Miss Baines, is on intimate terms here. It is through my niece, Miss Baines, that you're here yourself, Jane Higgins. And when Mr. Chester says he came under Miss Baines's wing, he says what is quite correct."

At this point Nina came up, and taking possession of Mr. Higgins's arm, by a skilful manœuvre separated Violet and Mario from the rest, and gave them an opportunity of talking together. Mrs. Higgins was consoled for the loss of the Duke by a substitute, in the shape of the fat Deputy, who was presented to her as a *Marchese;* and the two conversed in the French tongue, mauling and maltreating it as though an alliance had been entered into for that express purpose between "Ungrateful Italy" and "Perfidious Albion."

Meanwhile Violet and her lover exchanged a few hurried words. She was anxious to know how he had got on with her uncle. As to that Mario declared there was not much to be said. There had not been time to make any acquaintance. But he had discovered one thing, namely, that Mr. Higgins had not much faith in newspaper editing as a means of making money.

Mario laughed as he said it, and observed that the old gentleman might find himself mistaken. Things had taken a good turn with the *Tribune* since he (Mario) had been acting on his own judgment, and against the advice of certain sage counsellors. "You don't mean Nina?" asked Violet anxiously.

"Why not?"

"Because she is so clever, and knows so much about business, and is so entirely our friend."

"Ah, *va benissimo!* But every one for himself in this world, *Violetta mia!*"

Then Mr. and Mrs. Higgins went away. But before they departed they invited Captain Masi to go and see them—an invitation which made Violet's face glow with pleasure.

Nevertheless, in thinking over everything Mario had said to her that evening, she felt a little sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment. She wished he had not said those words about every one being for himself in this world; above all she wished he had not used them in connection with Nina. Of course he did not mean them in earnest. But she wished—she could not help wishing—that he had not said them.

CHAPTER XXVI.

As time passed, and the Directors of the Pontine Marshes Company made no sign, the Duke of Pontalto resolved to apply to Guarini; and he wrote him the following note:—

"DEAR GUARINI,—

"I send you a copy of the *Messenger of Peace* which I have just chanced to see. If you read the passage I have marked, you will see what they say about Lestro di Campolungo and Mattoccia. Perhaps

you don't know that that property belongs to me. If the Pontine Marshes Company want to buy it they had better apply at once, as I have other offers. I wonder who wrote that article in the *Messenger*.

"Yours,

"FRANCESCO NASONI."

To which Guarini answered:—

"DEAR DON CICCIO,—

"I return you the *Messenger of Peace*. It contains a capital puff for the P M. Company, which is doubly valuable as coming from an enemy. I have no personal interest in the matter, not holding a single share in the Company. No doubt you do wonder who wrote that article in the *Messenger*

"Yours,

"GIUSEPPE GUARINI."

Ciccio was a little puzzled at this. He did not believe Guarini's statement that he held no shares in the Company. And he did not understand how it was that the directors should neglect securing the land which was so indispensable for carrying out their enterprise. "Perhaps they think I shall make easy terms for them because I'm on the same side in politics," thought Ciccio at one moment. But he almost immediately relinquished this hypothesis as implying an incredible degree of simplicity—not to say idiocy—on the part of the directors. Then it struck him that they might be holding off lest, by any show of anxiety about the matter, they should tempt him to raise his price. But it was now openly stated that the Government had promised to cede to the Company for a term of years the lands contiguous to Mattoccia on both sides. It was therefore clear that the Company could not carry on their draining and planting operations without possessing also that estate which at present cut their property in two; and since the purchase was inevitable, all further fencing was mere waste of time.

Upon this he wrote to Gino Peretti, asking for an interview. Peretti replied with almost obsequious politeness that he deeply regretted that he was then on the point of starting for Lucca on business. He should, however, be back in Rome in about a week, when he would have the pleasure of waiting on the Duke of Pontalto, or of receiving him at his own house, as the Duke pleased. Inasmuch as politeness was not common with Peretti, Ciccio took a note of it as a symptom of his wishing to cajole the proprietor of Lestro di Campolungo and Mattoccia; and he resolved to be adamant in making his bargain. He waited a week; ten days; a fortnight; but no communication came from Peretti. Meanwhile public attention was considerably distracted from the Pontine Marshes by topics of fresher interest and more general importance. The newspapers found other matter for their leading articles. A threatened interpellation in the Chamber on the subject was heard of no more. The shareholders had to content themselves as best they could with the vague prospect that the Ministry would "do something" next session. Ciccio began to fear that the golden opportunity of selling his worthless land for a high price was slipping away, and spurred by this apprehension, he set off one evening for the office of the *Tribune of the People*, determined to find Peretti; or, at least, to learn where he could be found.

As he was passing along the Corso on foot, he ran against a man talking with a group of other men at the corner of a cross street. It was Peretti. "Oho, Signor Duca!" he cried, in his loud blustering way, "you've never been to see me, according to promise, hey?"

"I expected you to write and let me know when you came back," said Ciccio, staring at him with his dull light eyes.

"Lord bless me!" exclaimed the other, drawing back a step or two and slapping his forehead. "Did you? *Did* you? And I have been waiting to hear from you! How unfortunate! Never mind! Here I am now,

ready to serve you if I can. What is it, eh, Signor Duca?"

"It's a business matter," answered Ciccio, slowly looking round at Peretti's companions, of whom one was Carlo Silvotti, and the other two were a Lucchese farmer and Colonel Smith-Müller, in a greasy frock-coat tightly buttoned to the chin.

"Business? What, you're not going into the oil-trade?" rejoined Peretti, with his own fine humour.

Ciccio was determined not to be baulked this time. He drew Peretti a couple of paces apart from the others, and said in a lowered voice, "Look here! If you want that bit of land between Lestro di Campolungo and Mattoccia, you'd better make an offer at once."

"Bit of land—? Lestro di—? I don't understand, Signor Duca!"

"Oh, yes, you do," answered Ciccio, in his slow, cold-blooded tones. (Nina Guarini once said of him that if a codfish could be endowed with speech it would talk like Ciccio Nasoni.) "I mean the land in the Pontine Marshes. You'll have to buy it. It cuts the Company's property right in two."

"A-a-a-h! Pontine Marshes! Oh, *now* I see!" roared Peretti, not modulating his voice in the least. "Oho, *that's* what you wanted to speak about, is it? But I'm out of it. Got rid of all my shares and retired from the direction a week ago. Too many other things to attend to. But as to the land—why your papa, the Signor Principe, sold it, and pocketed the money some time back!"

It could scarcely be said that Ciccio grew pale, for he was never otherwise than pale. But his hue changed from a yellowish white to lead-colour. He passed his handkerchief over his face from forehead to chin; and then—slowly, deliberately, and to all appearance, phlegmatically as ever—Don Francesco Nasoni, Duca di Pontalto, &c., &c., &c., uttered a most tremendous imprecation, which could scarcely have surprised his hearers more if it had proceeded from the mouth of his pro-

totype the codfish himself. For an instant the other men looked at each other in amazement, and then they all burst into a peal of laughter, Peretti, of course leading the chorus, "*Bravo, Signor Duca! Bravissimo!*" he cried, wiping his eyes. And Silvotti observed, with his little dandified air of raillery, "Well, I thought I could rap out a pretty strong oath myself, on occasion; but you—! However, it shows what an advantage it is to have had a religious education."

Ciccio remained perfectly grave and impassive in the midst of it all. "I think," said he to Peretti, "that if my father has sold that land, he has sold what did not belong to him."

"No fear, Signor Duca! I have seen all the documents, and so has our lawyer. You need not be uneasy on our account." And at this there was another laugh. "But," proceeded Peretti, "I suppose your papa will arrange it with you. You'll settle the matter between you. Nothing I can do for you in oil? Good evening, Signor Duca." And Peretti swaggered off with Silvotti, rolling his head from side to side, and causing the passers-by to turn and look after him, as he broke every now and then into a stentorian roar of laughter at the recollection of Don Ciccio's curses.

It all passed in the space of a minute or so, but Ciccio remained standing on the pavement with a bewildered sense of having been asleep for a week or two and just awakened. Was it for this that Don Silvestro had been loading the *Messenger of Peace* to the muzzle with heavy charges, fired off in the interests of the directors of the Pontine Marshes Company? Was it for this that Prince Pietro Carlovingi had been scattering broadcast precious little seeds of suggestion as to the desirability of taking shares in it? All this in order to enable Gino Peretti to make a successful *coup* to increase the sale of the *Tribune of the People* and to put money into his father's pocket! Ciccio's intelligence did not move rapidly, and he needed some time before he fully grasped the news he had heard. But slowly he did grasp it. For a little

while he clung to the idea that his father had in truth cheated the Company by selling them what was not his to sell. As to Prince Nasoni being above the suspicion of such a fraud, Ciccio gave little weight to that. A man who had already so scandalously compromised the interests of his heir, might do anything. And in fact he had no belief in any gold-dust grains of honour or goodness which might still linger in the muddy channel of Prince Massimo Nasoni's life. Ciccio was not without cunning, but it was of an elementary kind. He saw things in the gross; his own interests looming large and distinct in the midst of a crowd of less conspicuous objects, which, however, he liked to be able to label in big letters. Things too subtle or too shifting to be easily catalogued in his brain he commonly ignored, or rather they escaped his apprehension. Ciccio had never done anything so bad as some of his father's actions; but he had never conceived anything so good as some of his father's sentiments. It was not, therefore, any belief in the Prince's unwillingness to swindle, but a conviction of Peretti's wariness against being swindled, which finally brought him to accept the fact that the estates near Terracina were gone from the illustrious house of Nasoni for evermore. He had been deceived, and led into a mistaken course, and cheated of his expected gains. When he was angry his wrath burned like a coke fire, with a smothered, choking kind of heat, difficult to kindle, almost impossible to extinguish. And he was profoundly angry now.

Although his errand to the office of the *Tribune* had been rendered fruitless, he mechanically pursued the road he had started on, absorbed in extremely disagreeable reflections. As he got into the more obscure and unfrequented streets, he became aware of the footsteps of some one following him, and presently he heard a puffing and panting as of a person out of breath. Without turning round, he moved his head sufficiently to perceive that the individual who followed him was one of those whom he had seen in company with

Peretti,—the man in the shabby coat buttoned to the chin.

Colonel Smith-Müller instantly observed that he was recognized, and, taking off his hat with a flourish, he almost compelled Ciccio to stop. "Have I the honour of addressing the Duke of Pontalto?" said he.

"Yes," answered Ciccio bluntly. Colonel Smith-Müller's appearance did not impress him with much respect. And Colonel Smith-Müller's utterance had a certain beery thickness which was not prepossessing. The Colonel fumbled in his breast-pocket, and took out a dog's-eared visiting card, which he presented to Ciccio. "I should wish the Duke of Pontalto to understand," said the Colonel, "that I am a mere passing acquaintance—not a friend; by no means a friend—of Signor Gino Peretti. That is the first point I wish to make clear. I am not a rich man, but I am an old soldier and a man of honour, and I beg to separate myself from Peretti and his proceedings in the affair of the Pontine Marshes Company."

Ciccio had been standing looking at him vacantly with the card in his hand. He now moved nearer to a street lamp in order to read it, and having read it, said sulkily, "What have *you* got to do with the Pontine Marshes Company?"

"I heard, unavoidably," pursued the Colonel, "a part of what Peretti was saying to you. And I perceived—unavoidably—that you were disturbed and surprised by it. There is a coarseness about Peretti, a want of the high-toned feelings of a gentleman, which I, although now but a rough old soldier, yet as a man of honour——"

"What do you want?" interrupted Ciccio unceremoniously, and at the same time recoiling from the too close approach of Colonel Smith-Müller. The latter had been drinking, but he was sober enough to take keen note of Don Ciccio's demeanour. He drew himself up for a moment with a majestic air, as though about to protest against this cavalier mode of treating an officer and a gentleman. But then, apparently

relenting, he tapped his breast, and said, "Signor Duca, I feel for you. I do, indeed. You have been badly treated. I, too, have been badly treated. I have been the victim of deception in my time. I feel for you, and can make allowances. Listen! If you would like a slashing article in the *Tribune of the People* I can get it done for you—for a *honorarium*. As an old soldier and a man of honour, I tell you frankly that I cannot afford to work without a *honorarium*."

"The *Tribune!* Why that's Peretti's own paper!" exclaimed Ciccio. And then muttered under his breath, "The fellow's more drunk than I thought."

Colonel Smith-Müller put his finger to his nose. "No, Signor Duca: the *Tribune* is not Peretti's paper any longer," said he. "But Peretti is only a stalking-horse. *Quoi! Sacerré nom d'une pipe!* There are others behind Peretti, who pull the wires. I know more than you think. Would the Duke of Pontalto like to find out how that sale was made?—who was the go-between? Ha! Is a man to despoil his own son for a ——? I intrude. I withdraw. I have the honour to wish your Excellency a good evening."

And here the Colonel made an elaborate show of turning away, keeping all the while a cunning eye on Ciccio's pondering face.

"What do you know?" asked the young man suddenly, in a dry, mechanical tone, as though the words had been jerked out of him without his will.

Colonel Smith-Müller wheeled sharp round, like a soldier on drill (somewhat to the danger of his equilibrium), and, once more putting his finger to his nose, answered, "Monseigneur, that is my secret. I have already informed you that I am not rich. And, although as an old soldier, and a man of——"

All at once, with an extraordinary rapid transition of manner, he stopped short, folded his arms across his chest, winked, and added, "*Allons! Jouons cartes sur table!* I can tell you something you'd like to know. And I will —if you'll pay me. It's no use trying to gammon *you!*"

It had suddenly occurred to him that Ciccio had probably no illusions about honour, or principle, or disinterestedness to be played on. With Masi—even although Masi was far from taking the Colonel at the Colonel's own valuation—it was always possible to appeal to some ideal in him. To do so with Ciccio might only be to excite his incurable suspicion. The Colonel did not much misjudge his man so far. He rather gained than lost in Ciccio's estimation by this change of tone. The watchful eyes bent upon the Duke of Pontalto noted that he looked once more at the visiting-card as if to impress on his memory the name of an obscure *café* which was scrawled on it in pencil by way of address. But Ciccio was not to be hurried into any compact by a *coup de main*. "I don't know that you have anything to tell me which is worth paying for," said he; "indeed, I'm pretty sure you can't have. But if you like to write to me you can."

Then, without any further farewell, he tossed the dog's-eared card into the gutter, and leisurely walked away.

A most ferocious scowl darkened Colonel Smith-Müller's red and bloated face, and he looked with a murderous eye at the heavily-loaded cane he carried. But the impulse passed in a second. He steadied himself, made a movement with his fingers as if to pull up a shirt-collar which remained invisible, and stood looking after Don Ciccio's retreating figure with an evil smile, which seemed to express in one concentrated grimace a whole life of blackguardism, treachery, and malignity. "*Va, ganache!*" said he. "Do you think to impose upon *me*, with your airs of *Principe Romano?* Fine princes, father and son! Ha! he's avaricious too, this white-blooded Don Ciccio. *Bon.* We'll see what can be done with the *Herr Papa*. Accursed breed, every one of them!" And then the Colonel staggered away in the opposite direction, tainting the evening air with a polyglot litany of oaths, strongly flavoured with beer and brandy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

When Peretti had told the Duke of Pontalto that he had got rid of all his shares in the Pontine Marshes Company he had spoken truly. He had sold his shares advantageously. He still swore, whenever he happened to mention it, that the scheme was a magnificent scheme, a patriotic scheme, a scheme for which unborn generations of Italians would bless the names of its originators. Only he did not happen to mention it so often as formerly. His activity was directed into other channels. He was interested financially in the new branch railway to Porto Moresco which Bini in the Chamber, and Guarini outside the Chamber, hoped to push and pull through the Legislature; and he was interested politically in the trial of an injured gentleman at Bologna, whom the police had arrested for some warm-hearted utterances tending to upset the institutions of his country, and had then, with narrow-minded tyranny, detained in prison on a charge of homicide committed some eight years previously. All the excitement and enthusiasm about the draining of the Pontine Marshes seemed to have exhaled itself in talk; and there remained behind, as the sole solid deposit, some thousands of francs in the pockets of two or three individuals, and a number of leaves of paper adorned with Government stamps and illegible signatures which proved the shareholders' right to participate in the enormous profits of the Company,—whenever matters should be far enough advanced for a dividend to be declared.

The collapse of such an enterprise in England might have involved ruin to many persons. In Italy the catastrophe was not so severe nor so widespread. The mania for speculation and the money to speculate with, are both rarer on the south than the north side of the

Alps. But there were losses—inconvenient and, in some cases, disastrous losses. It was commonly said that the Clericals had been hard hit. Perhaps this notion derived confirmation from the demeanour of Prince Carlovingi, whose manner plainly showed depression and discouragement. It was known that he had spoken favourably of the prospects of the Company. And now every one said that Pietro Carlovingi had lost heavily True, he was rich enough. But even rich men did not like to throw away their cash—perhaps rich men liked it less than others. And the figure at which the Prince's loss was estimated rose from scores to hundreds and thousands of francs. When people talked to Peretti about how the Prince had been caught, and how Pietro Carlovingi, who was generally so reserved and cool, was quite unable to conceal his chagrin, but grew gloomy and irritable at the least allusion to the famous Company, the oil-merchant went into fits of laughter, slapping his thigh, and roaring out that old Carlovingi was an ancient fox, and the best fun going. And to his intimates Peretti declared, with irrepressible bursts of laughter and expressions of the warmest admiration, that "Carlovingi had never had a *soldo* in the Company,—not a *soldo!* *Vecchio pagliaccio!* He went about for a week or two hinting to every one that the Pontine Marshes were the real El Dorado. That was because he wanted Ciccio to sell his land well. And now that the other foxes have lost their tails he pretends to have been trapped himself. Don't you see? It's the best defence possible against any reproaches from his own side. *Vecchio pagliaccio!*"

But the comic side of the affair was not so visible to Mario Masi. He had built many hopes on the success of the Company. He had quieted many creditors, and had tempted some supporters to the very verge of advancing money to the newspaper, by the contagion of his sanguine faith in it. The news that Peretti had abandoned the direction of the Company was the first blow. Then came the rumour that he had sold his

shares, and the certainty that the Ministry would do nothing in the matter before next Session. And "next Session" in such a case was, in most people's opinion, equivalent to the Greek Kalends. Nina Guarini came to him one day in his office, and urged him to give up the paper at once.

"You were right about the Pontine Marshes shares, Signora Nina," said he, as soon as he saw her, by way of anticipating the "I told you so!" which he expected.

But Nina had no intention of triumphing over him. "I wish with all my soul I had been wrong!" she answered. "But it is too late to say anything about that now."

"I suppose you had private information how things were going?" said Masi.

There was a bitter insinuation in this which did not escape Nina, as though she might have induced Masi to sell his shares by displaying a little more candour. But she forgave it. She had been prepared to find him irritable, suspicious, and unreasonable. She passed over this speech, and set herself to persuade him to give up the newspaper at once. Here was an opportunity. The disappointment about the Company and his failure to realize his shares were an evident and valid excuse—if any excuse were needed—for washing his hands of the *Tribune* altogether. He had done his best. He had struggled on gallantly. Even his creditors could not deny that. And if he were now made bankrupt it would not be a dishonourable bankruptcy. It was contrary to his duty to himself and to others to persist in this losing game. Let him think of Violet.

He answered her sharply that he understood his duty, and needed no instruction on that score.

Still Nina showed no resentment. "Look here, Masi," she said. "If you were once out of this hornets'-nest of a newspaper some position might be found for you. I am sure Beppe would help you. I will undertake as much for him."

Masi's face brightened with sudden animation. "Would Beppe advance any money for the *Tribune?*" he asked.

Nina shook her hand decisively. "No, no, no; do not imagine it for an instant!" she answered, in her clearest and most resolute tones. "And how could we expect him to do so? It would be like pouring water into a sieve. Give it up, Masi. For Heaven's sake, give it up!"

"Give it up!" he repeated almost savagely. "It is easy for you to say 'Give it up.' If I am forced to give it up, I shall give up——a good many other things at the same time."

In fact, Masi had invested not only his poor little patrimony, the house and farm at Boscombroso, and the small capital in money, but he had, so to say, invested all his vanity, all his ambition, all his chimerical hopes of good fortune, in the sinking-fund of the *Tribune of the People.* He who had hitherto lived merely from day to day, and from hour to hour, accepting the pleasures and avoiding the pains of life as far as in him lay, turning his head away from disagreeable prospects, resisting disquieting impressions, with the *vis inertiæ* of his southern temperament, which clung obstinately to the enjoyment of the present moment—he, even he, had become gradually absorbed in his newspaper enterprise, to the exclusion of almost every other thought. There was something of the excitement of a gaming table about it to him, a constant succession of hopes, of chances, of combinations, and ministerial modifications, and political changes of scene—a vista of inexhaustible possibilities which needed only a passive persistence in hope, an eternal postponement of that decisive effort which was always to be made to-morrow, but which would surely be rendered unnecessary by some brilliant turn of luck to-day.

Colonel Smith-Müller had acquired a strange influence over Masi. He had made himself the accomplice

of Masi's self-love, and the champion of Masi's self-delusions. He had at that moment a scheme afoot, which was to produce an important sum of money sufficient to float the *Tribune* for a month to come at least. And what might not happen in a month? Masi was to have a clear half of the gains, without advancing a penny; merely as payment for his influence in obtaining an introduction to the Minister of War. The plan was this:—

Greece, as the Colonel could inform Masi, whom he trusted, but would on no account inform any one else, was secretly preparing for an attack on the Sublime Porte, in some of her European provinces. Colonel Smith-Müller had just come from Greece. His sister had just died in Greece. His sister's husband still lived in Greece. The Colonel had an extraordinarily wide connection through Greece: Liberals, old comrades, men who were ready to strike a blow for Hellas against the iniquitous Turk. The Colonel's religious sentiments usually got the better of him at any mention of the Moslem, and he would fall to cursing and swearing in his orthodoxy, and would have to be brought back to the point. Well; the Greeks being engaged in these secret preparations, and having not quite so much money as enthusiasm, were casting about for every means of collecting arms and materials of war at the least possible expenditure of cash. Now it so happened that, of all things in the world, soldiers' rifles were what they were particularly short of. And it also happened that the Colonel knew of at least twenty thousand old rifles — old, but still perfectly serviceable—that were lying in the Italian military storehouse, having been superseded by a newer model in certain regiments of the line. To buy these old Italian rifles at a low figure, and to sell them—cheap indeed, but still at fully double that low figure—to the Greek agents would be an admirable *coup*. It could be managed with a little good-will on the part of the Minister of War, who would present the matter

to his colleagues as merely an advantageous way of getting rid of disused material, instead of allowing the rifles to lie and rot in the stores, and take valuable space that was wanted for other purposes. Indeed, the transaction was to be represented as a purely mercantile one to the Minister. It would not be stated who were to be the real purchasers of the rifles. They might be bought as if for a German gentleman, resident in—say South America; and might be supposed to be wanted for the equipment of the Equatorial Militia. "For," said the Colonel, puffing out his chest, "I am incapable, as an old soldier, and as a man of honour, of betraying the cause of Greece. Hellas is sacred to me, Masi; sacred. And I think if it's well managed we shall clear, at least, fifty thousand francs between us."

The Colonel's plan was complete in every particular save one: who was to appear in the matter as the agent of the German gentleman in South America? When Masi asked why the Colonel should not appear himself, and be presented by some member of his own Legation, it appeared that there were insuperable objections in the way. One was that the Colonel was not on good terms with the members of his own Legation on account of his too pronounced Liberal opinions in general; and another was that he was a marked man by reason of his notorious phil-Hellenism in particular. "No, no," said the Colonel. "The person must be a foreigner,—a non-Italian, but not me. It ought to be some one who might be supposed to have merely mercantile views in the matter. Can't some one be found,—for a small percentage?"

The word "mercantile" recalled to Masi's mind his English acquaintances. He bade Colonel Smith-Müller look in at the *Tribune* office that evening, and set off to Miss Baines's lodgings.

All this time he had not been assiduous in his visits to the Higginses. They bored him. And Masi, never tolerant of boredom, had latterly refused to endure it even for Violet's sweet sake. This was a

disappointment to her. She had hoped that Mario would win Uncle Joshua's heart. It was impossible not to like Mario when he wished you to like him. But when she urged him to make himself pleasant to the old man, and to become a more frequent and familiar visitor to him, Mario had asked disdainfully if she supposed him capable of flattering that vulgar old shopkeeper for the sake of his pounds sterling. And to Violet's humble representations that there need be neither falsehood nor flattery in showing respect and good humour to an old man who stood in the place of a father to her, and even in refraining from contradicting him too roughly, Mario answered that those feminine tactics did not suit him. It was all very well for a woman; but he must speak out what he thought, and could not make himself a humbug to please any man. "Besides," he would add, when he was in a more lazy and less irritable mood, "there's no use in my bothering myself to go there. They don't want me. Your uncle has always got that hulking Englishman smoking and talking there; your new-found cousin."

"William Chester is a very good fellow, Mario."

"*Sarà!* I dare say he may be. But he's very dull, very prosaic, very positive."

"Dull! Oh Mario, William Chester is not dull; he is quiet, and perhaps a little shy, but not dull."

"*Cara mia*, it doesn't matter a straw what he is."

Kitty Low happened to be present once when Mario spoke in this tone of Mr. Chester. And she observed afterwards, as a sort of general proposition uttered over her needlework after an hour's rigid silence, that she thought it would be a queer way to reckon any bird's flying powers by the flapping of its wings; and that for her part she had noticed that them as soared the highest, flutt'ered the least. Chester was a great favourite with Kitty.

But now that Mario had the certainty that his Pontine Marshes shares were little better than waste

paper, he suddenly resolved to make up to Mr. Higgins. He left Colonel Smith-Müller to go to Miss Baines's lodgings, as had been said, and as soon as he entered Violet was struck by his haggard face. But he did not tell her how terrible a blow he had received. He put a kind of perverse *amour propre* in persisting to Violet that all was going well. There would be vicissitudes of course; ups and downs. That was to be expected. Her dear friend, Nini Guarini, had perhaps told her already that there had been a disappointment about some shares he held. No? Ah, well, it didn't much matter. Nina had had private information which might have been useful to him if given in time, but, as he had said the other evening, every one for himself in this world! It would all come right. Violet must have faith in him, and in the *Tribune*. Above all, she must be careful not to say a word which could make her uncle fancy things were in a bad way with the paper.

Faith in him! What was the faith he expected from her? She shrank from acknowledging to herself that she had no longer an unhesitating belief in his word, a fearless confidence in his sincerity. She extenuated as much as possible those deviations from the straightforward path which she could not but perceive. Mario's education had been so different from hers! Mario's views of what was binding on one's conscience—in minor matters—were the natural result of the different world in which he had lived! In great things he would be sure to do what was right. Poor Violet had already come to accept and excuse those aberrations in Mario from her own plain standard of right and wrong, the existence of which she had so indignantly repudiated in reply to Nina's warning. Faith in him? Well, at least she still had hope,—and charity.

"Do you think," said Masi abruptly, after sitting silent for a longer time than usual, "that your uncle would give you a *dot* now,—a sum of money in hand, if I were to tell him of our engagement and renounce any future legacy?"

She was startled, and looked at him with anxious eyes. "I—I don't know, Mario. I'm afraid not. It is not an English custom;—at least not in our class of life."

"I would give up all hope of a legacy, remember," he repeated. It did not occur to Violet to resent his pretension of "giving up" something that was hers and not his. But she foresaw very clearly that her uncle would certainly not admit any bargain of the kind. "You know, dear Mario," she said timidly, "Uncle Joshua isn't bound to give me anything at all."

But the idea had taken hold of Mario. He inquired whether Violet were going to see her uncle that evening. She said no; she had been on duty all the morning with Uncle Joshua and Mrs. Higgins, and had taken leave of absence for that night, to stay at home with Aunt Betsy, who was not very well. "You're not going, Mario!" she exclaimed, seeing him rise and take his hat. "Oh, I did so hope that you would stay this evening,—this one evening, when we might be quietly together."

"My dear love," said he, touched by the pleading face, much paler and thinner than when he had first known it, "I would willingly stay; how willingly! But I have an appointment I must not miss. A business appointment it is, *carina*. It is, indeed,—truly."

"Of course it is, since you say so," answered Violet. She felt indefinably hurt and mortified to hear him confirm his statement with such emphasis, as who should say, "I do tell a lie now and then, but this is the truth."

He looked at her quiet downcast face for a second or two, and then exclaimed, "What a queer little English creature it is! Some men might fancy you didn't love them——"

"What!"

"You're so different from the other women."

"What other women?" asked Violet, opening her blue eyes and looking up at him.

He burst into a laugh, took her head lightly between his open palms, kissed her forehead, and went out of the room.

"Where is your appointment, Mario?" she asked, following him to the door.

He stopped and looked back with a sudden complacent smile. "Aha! *Ci siamo!* You *are* a little bit jealous and suspicious then, after all."

"Jealous!" she echoed in inexpressible astonishment.

"Oh, I understand all about it. But my appointment, *cara gioja*, is at the office, with a terrible old Servian Colonel, who is coming to talk on an important political matter. You may guess if I wouldn't rather stay with you. But it can't be helped!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

INSTEAD of going at once to the office of the *Tribune*, Masi betook himself to the boarding-house in which Mr. Higgins lodged, and was ushered into the little sitting-room, where he found that gentleman alone. Mrs. Higgins, he explained, liked a little society of an evening, and had remained in the public drawing-room. He himself did not care much for the sort of folks they had in the house just now. They made music every evening instead of conversation, and Mr. Higgins didn't like music. The old man looked lonely, sitting there in the foreign boarding-house with no companion but his pipe. Certainly Mrs. Higgins would have remained by his side all the evening had he commanded it. And certainly he would not have hesitated to sacrifice her wishes to his own had it suited him to do so. But Uncle Joshua was beginning to discover that there was a difference between the attentions paid him by his gentle niece Betsy, or by

bright, pleasant-tempered Violet, and those extorted from "Jane Higgins" by the over-ruling force of his will. Selfish frivolity may be coerced, but can no more be trained than the zebra, and makes but a bad yoke-fellow for the journey of life. But these considerations, if they passed through Mr. Higgins's mind at all, merely glimmered there in vague, indeterminate forms. And he had no idea of lamenting or considering himself otherwise than as a man with whom Fortune had dealt pretty justly, *i. e.* very favourably.

He received Captain Masi very civilly, and in his English manner of hospitality was about to order wine to be brought for him, but Masi refused this.

"Well, I don't know but what you're right from one point of view, though I'm sorry I can't offer you any refreshment," said Uncle Joshua. "It's poor stuff they give you to drink here. I take whiskey and water myself, not being able to swallow the red vinegar they call wine. If you come to see me at Dozebury, when I live in England, Captain Marsy, I'll give you as sound a glass of sherry as ever you drank in your life, and some of the best home-brewed ale in the three kingdoms."

"Miss Baines and Miss Violet are not here this evening," said Masi, hypocritically, as he took a seat opposite the old man.

"No, no. My niece, Miss Baines, is not quite well, and Violet stays with her aunt."

"She is so amiable!" said Masi.

"Violet is a girl that would do honour to any family. She's her mother over again—a thorough-bred Higgins!"

Partly the half-conscious sense of being somewhat neglected by his new wife, partly the mention of Violet's mother, revived old memories. And Uncle Joshua talked on, recalling this and that trait of Violet's childhood; softened by a touch of that indefinable melancholy which belongs to even the pleasantest association of the irrevocable Past; smiling almost

tenderly, as he described the little one's prettiness and cleverness, and fearless truthful spirit, and saucy funny ways.

Of all that he said the phrase "Violet is a girl who would do honour to any family" had chiefly struck Masi, and taken together with Mr. Higgins's paternally affectionate tone inspired him with a sudden impulse. He had come to the boarding-house without any settled plan of action; thinking at one moment that he would try to interest Mr. Higgins in the Greek rifles scheme, at another, that he would cautiously sound him as to his intentions with regard to Violet. Now all at once he spoke.

"She would, indeed, do honour to any family!" he cried. "And happy will be the man who succeeds in winning her for his wife. I have long wished to speak to you, Mr. Higgins; to tell you how devotedly I love your niece, and how ardently I hope for your consent to our marriage!"

"What, what, *what?*" said Mr. Higgins, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and staring at Masi as if he thought he had suddenly gone mad. But the other, once started, went on pouring out a long and eloquent speech which his foreign accent (always stronger when he became excited), together with his rapid utterance, made unintelligible to Mr. Higgins as regarded the details; although he did manage to seize the main drift of it.

"Stop, stop, stop, my good sir," said the old man when Masi paused for a moment. "This is a very serious matter;—a matter to be very seriously—and slowly" (for Masi appeared to be about to start off again), "*slowly* discussed. I'll tell you at once that I should not be in favour of Violet's marrying a foreigner. Foreigners have a great many good qualities, no doubt. Oh, no doubt of it. But, you see, their ways are not our ways, nor their manners our manners."

"Oh, as to that, all the world is of the same flesh and blood. And I hope you would not consider it an

insuperable objection to be a foreigner;—especially if your niece's happiness were concerned."

"My niece's happiness——! Have you said anything to Violet?"

Masi hesitated for an instant before answering in a deprecatory tone, "I wished to speak to you first, of course. But you know that when a man is in love, it is not easy to hide it from the woman he loves. There are other ways of speaking than in words."

"That's true, Captain Marsy. And I take note of your fairness in pointing it out. But Violet's not the kind of girl to jump at the idea of a man's being in love with her, unless he tells her so. If it's only dumb show, I think we're pretty safe." Then seeing that Masi was about to speak, he went on, "Now let me advise you as a friend to give up this notion. You find some lady of your own country,—and I'm sure there are plenty of handsome women among them, with some of the finest eyes I ever saw in my life!" said Uncle Joshua gallantly. "You stick to one of your own nation, brought up in the same ways, and talking the same language. A well-set-up fellow like you, and clever, too, they tell me, needn't go a-begging for a wife. You just ask your friend, Madam Guarinny, she'll find some one for you, I'll bet a guinea. And the thing could be managed according to the customs of your country, you know; without your bothering yourself, or wasting your time in going courting."

It was Masi's turn to stare now. He had not anticipated, he could never have imagined, such an extraordinary mode of receiving his declaration; such a cool fashion of treating him like a child or a savage who could be consoled for the loss of one toy by the offer of another! He would have liked to overwhelm this dull, pompous ass of an Englishman with a torrent of indignant sarcasm and contempt: to tell him that Italians had red blood in their veins, and not beer and sea-fog! But as he thrust his hand into his breast with an impatient gesture to take his handkerchief, he felt the

crackling paper of a large square envelope, received just before he left the *Tribune* office. He knew well what it contained: a letter from the printer, which he had not dared to read through. He had glanced at it, and put it in his pocket. The recollection checked his explosion of wrath.

"Mr. Higgins," he said, with a melancholy and dignified smile, "it is too late for me to profit by all the prudential considerations you put before me. I may have done a rash thing in setting all my happiness on marrying a foreigner" (for the life of him he could not refrain from this ironical turning upside down of Mr. Higgins's insular objection to foreigners); "but my attachment to Violet is too deep and too serious to be shaken off. You interrupted what I was about to say. I told you it was difficult to avoid speaking. I have spoken. How was it possible to be much in the society of a girl like Violet without loving her? And how, if one loved her, was it possible to avoid—"

"But you haven't been much in her society that I know of! You don't mean that this has been going on ever since she was in Rome before?" broke in Mr. Higgins, with a face which grew every moment more perplexed and pained.

Masi glided over this point. Love did not reckon by time. Half-an-hour in some cases was as much as half-a-year in others. And then, feeling the hardship of his own case more and more as he put it into words, he began a moving narration of the sacrifices he had made for Violet's sake. He did not regret them. No sacrifice was too great for the hope of winning such a wife. But the fact was he had had a good position in the army, and a fair competency inherited from his father. He was leading an existence agreeable in the present, and free from anxiety for the future, when Violet Moore came across his path; and from that moment he had had no thought but to win her. He had understood at first that she was entirely unprovided for. Later he had heard, quite by accident, that she was the niece of

a man in a fine position, a man of fortune—("No, no," muttered Uncle Joshua, implacably honest as to a matter of fact. "A man in a good way of business, and universally respected about Dozebury and Charnham way")—Well, that had made no difference to Masi, who was not a man to seek any woman for her money. He had set about to exert himself. He had founded one of the most leading newspapers in Rome: a newspaper which had been praised and spoken of all over Italy, and which had attracted the attention of men high in the Government and in politics. But it involved a life of anxiety, of occasional disappointment, of momentary embarrassment. The speculation in itself was certain to succeed. But a man of Mr. Higgins's experience must know perfectly well that there come moments in every man's business, when a sum of ready money can make his fortune, if it only arrives at the right time. When he had heard of Mr. Higgins's second marriage, he had of course been aware that Violet's prospects of inheritance, whatever they had been before, were greatly diminished. But that made no difference in his sentiments for her. He had made up his mind to come and say frankly to Mr. Higgins, "Give us a comparatively small sum at once, by way of dowry for your niece, and we willingly renounce all expectation of anything more in future!"

He spoke very quickly, and rather loudly. And his manner conveyed a singular impression—as if he were reciting something he had learned by heart long ago, and which he was able to repeat as often and as rapidly as he pleased. But it was not so. He had not prepared beforehand one sentence of his speech. The effect spoken of was rather like that which may be observed in the performance of an *improvisatore*, than which nothing less apparently spontaneous can be imagined; —although persons who have never heard one may find that difficult to believe. There is too much tension to allow of any play of light and shadow. Mario's desire to put his statements in the best light, and to let nothing

slip out which should mar his effects, gave him something of the anxious constraint, the forced rapidity of the *improvisatore*. If he had merely meant to tell the simple truth, it would have been different. The safe solid facts might be relied on not to contradict him or each other. But when one is not *quite* sure what is coming next—! And lies, like rhymes, must hang together.

Mr. Higgins listened with an air of depression altogether unusual with him. He, who was always equal to every occasion, ready to give forth his stores of wisdom for the guidance of others, and quite satisfied that he should be able to find the right course for himself, had now an uncertain, bewildered, anxious look; and his bawling dominant voice was so subdued that Dozebury would not have known it. He dismissed Masi at length, abruptly saying that he was tired, and needed to think over all this matter quietly. Masi held out his hand before going away. "Will you not give me a word of encouragement, Mr. Higgins?" he said. "I can assure you I have need of it sometimes, what with one anxiety and another."

Uncle Joshua paused, meditatively looking at the outstretched hand. Then he said, "Well, if you'll excuse me, Captain Marsy, I think I would rather not shake hands with you just now. Not," he added emphatically, seeing the other flush angrily, and draw back his hand with a haughty gesture, "*Not* as meaning any offence to you. And if you'll take it as a passing civility, I'll shake hands with you all the same. But I am a just man, and I wish to do what is right. And I do *not* wish to raise up hopes and notions that are anywise contrairy to the truth. And you seem to me, if you'll excuse me again, to be a person that gets easily blown out with a very little puff of hope. Now you know lying hopes are like doctored wine; they mayn't taste bad, but there's sure to be a next morning's headache in 'em."

Masi's mind vibrated in so nice a balance between

two impulses,—the one, to shake the dust of Higgins's abode from his feet, and have done with him for evermore: the other, to save his own pride by treating the old man as an eccentric humourist from whom anything might be tolerated,—that it seemed to himself as if he were waiting like a disinterested third person, to see what would happen, and had no power of choice in the decision. Finally, he burst into a boyish laugh, shook Mr. Higgins's hand with a jesting assurance that the civility bound him to nothing, and bade him "good night" in a tone of voice which was expressive of making affectionate allowances for him.

At the foot of the stairs he ran against William Chester entering the house.

"Have you been to see the Higginses?" asked Chester.

"Yes; I'm just come from their salon. In fact Mr. Higgins sent me away. He is tired, and wants to go to bed."

"Oh! In that case perhaps I had better not go up. Unless the ladies——"

"The ladies are not there. They're both at home," answered Masi, completely ignoring Mrs. Joshua Higgins. And it was to be observed that Chester accepted this oversight without protest.

"Come along with me to my office," said Masi. "I'll give you a cigar. I should like to hear what you say to a speculation I am contemplating."

"A speculation!"

"It is partly a political matter, and must not be talked about. But I know I can trust you."

Chester rather wondered how he knew it, and why he should trust him. The two men had met many times, but had never yet exchanged ten words *tête-à-tête*. This thought occurred to the Englishman as he walked side by side with Masi towards the office of the *Tribune*. It did not occur to Masi at all. "You know Colonel Smith-Müller?" he said.

"Well, I—yes; I travelled up from Brindisi with him."

"He's a strange fellow;—full of ideas. If that man had had a little capital to carry out his projects, he might have been a millionnaire. As it is, others have profited by them. So is the world made. *Sic vos non vobis.*"

"Is he a great friend of yours?"

"Oh, 'a great friend.' *Per Bacco*, that's a great word."

"To tell you the truth, the Colonel does not impress me very favourably."

"Well, one doesn't expect such a man, who has been knocked about all over the world, to be a model of what you call respectability."

"One is greatly disappointed in his case if one does expect it."

"H'm! I see you have a little prejudice against the poor Colonel."

"No, really I think not. I can't help seeing that he is drunken and dirty. But you can scarcely call that a prejudice."

"All the same he may have more ideas than the soberest and cleanest Quaker. But what I mean by prejudice is, that you English won't believe in a man if he differs from your pattern."

"I'm sorry to say this particular pattern is not uncommon at home. We have all manner of specimens, of dirt and drunkenness. We do not, however, as a rule, make Colonels of them."

Masi laughed. "Oh, as to that—! A guerilla kind of Colonel, I dare say. But you have no idea of the extent of that man's connections in Europe. The men he has known and been in correspondence with—*pezzi grossi*, what do you call them? Great wigs? Ah, yes; big wigs—would surprise you. He has been behind the scenes in so many political combinations! People little guess who are the machinists when they see the grand decorations on the theatre!"

"Is he mixed up in the speculation you spoke of?" asked Chester, as they reached the door of the office.

"He suggested the idea to, me, but"—dropping his

voice mysteriously—"I believe there are political personages in Greece behind him—men who must not be seen in the affair. The Colonel is only an instrument. Shall I go first? Let me light a match! The staircase is dark."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"HELLAS!" thundered Colonel Smith-Müller "Hellas is my ideal, my idol! And you English, you whose Byron died for Greece, you who preach liberty and practise tyranny, what do you for Hellas?"

"Well," answered Chester, seeing that the Colonel paused for a reply, "I don't know that it was our business to do anything particular for Hellas. But if it was our business, I beg to observe that we've done it. Some people think we have a little overdone it. Did you ever happen to hear of the Ionian Islands, Colonel Smith-Müller!"

"Not your business!" echoed the Colonel, passing over the Ionian Islands. "Ah, there it is, my dear, my generous young friend. I regret to say it:—I admire, I honour so many individuals of your nation; but the policy of England in Europe is detestable. You may not know,—you do not know,—but as a man of honour I am bound to tell you that in diplomatic circles, in social circles, in military circles,—*bref*, in all circles, I hear the most terrible things said of England."

Chester knocked off the ash of his cigar before replying, "Well, if you don't mind, I'm sure I don't."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Colonel with a cavernous unsmiling mouth and very watchful twinkling eyes. "There, my beloved Masi, you have a true specimen of the English *loukdogue*. He 'doesn't mind;' ha, ha,

ha! But *I* mind. It pains me. It excites me. It occasionally infuriates me."

"Why on earth should it?"

"Because I am of English descent, of English blood,—nay, I consider myself in some respects as an Englishman."

"Oh, come, I say," exclaimed Chester, who seemed to think this far the most damaging attack on his country that had been made yet.

"Yes; my heart burns with generous fire—will you pass the *rhum, mon cher Masi!*—with intolerable mortification, when I think that Russia is going to sweep you all out of India, every man of you, bag and baggage! Your Downing Street is a Fool, my dear. And your India Boards are Blockheads!"

"Ah, I dare say they do make big blunders now and then."

"Blunders! They are imbeciles. And your *Corps Diplomatique. Allez!* Those poor gentlemen excite a smile of pity. They know nothing that goes on. Nothing. Do you know what is wanted for your Fool of a Downing Street, my dear, valued young friend? And for your Blockheads of Boards?" The Colonel stretched himself across the rickety table in the Editor's room at the *Tribune* office, around which he and Chester and Masi were seated, and folding his arms on it, hissed out in a melodramatic whisper, "*A well-organized secret service.* Well-organized, remember. Manned by officers and gentlemen; men of the world, good linguists,—men who are ready to go through fire and water to carry out orders."

"Spies, eh?" said Chester coolly.

The Colonel started to his feet with a sudden bound which nearly overset the rickety table. "Great Heaven!" he exclaimed, raising his hands above his head. "Are not these English incredible? Incredible! I speak of a disciplined, organized, highly-educated body of officers and gentlemen,—old soldiers,—men who have fought and bled—*Grand Dieu!*—and all he

can see in it is the vulgar notion of a—pah! The word chokes me!" Here the Colonel spat with much elaboration. "A fellow like your Bow Streets!"

"Oh dear no! Not at all like our 'Bow Streets,' if you mean by that our police. Our police are a very respectable body of men."

The Colonel drew back a little, and folded his arms, regarding Chester with a majestic scowl. But finding that his frown was supported with stoical indifference, his brow gradually cleared, and he broke into a pensive smile. "Hah!" he exclaimed, filling himself another glass of *rhum*, "they are a singular people, these English. But I love them. I can't help it. It may be a weakness remaining from my childish days when I had an English *bonne*. It may be an inheritance of race——"

"Oh, no, it isn't *that!*" interrupted Chester. He seemed able to endure with philosophy any of the Colonel's utterances, save those in which he hinted that England might have the honour of claiming some share in him.

"What is it, then?" rejoined the Colonel. "There are mysteries in our construction. Deep mysteries, yet unsolved. I am somewhat of a mystic myself, by nature."

"*Basta!* Let us keep to the point," said Masi.—"You don't think then, Mr. Chester, that you would be willing to appear in the purchase of these rifles?"

"I am quite sure of it. I couldn't do it."

"It's a promising thing," observed Masi, wistfully.

"Promising!" shouted the Colonel. "It's sure! A certain success! And a percentage on every sale,—a percentage that would run to thousands—not hundreds—of francs. I don't know, but it seems to me that two or three hundred pounds sterling are worth just taking your hand out of your pocket to pick up! Nothing more is required than that:—the trouble of stretching out your hand—*Donnerwetter!*"

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you, Captain Masi," said Chester, without answering the Colonel. "But I

assure you it is out of the question. It would be contrary to all my ideas."

Masi gloomily contemplated the end of his cigar which he held in one hand, while he passed the fingers of the other through his short curly hair. As he did so, a grey streak became visible near each temple. Chester felt an indefinable pity for him; although he little knew how much cause there was for pity. It was distasteful to him to see a man like Masi under the influence of such a fellow as Colonel Smith-Müller. Chester could not understand it. Masi was neither stupid nor ignorant. And to the Englishman it seemed that one must be both to believe in the Servian Colonel for ten minutes. He did not know that Masi expected grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles, in all matters connected with secret politics; and that he was a believer in the wonders to be worked by the cabalistic formula of "a combination." To be sure the belief was very vague. But the beliefs which cannot be defined are often those most obstinately clung to.

"*Bene!*" said Masi, with a shrug as if he were shaking something from his shoulders. "No use in tormenting oneself. We must try elsewhere."

"If," said Colonel Smith-Müller, who had been furtively watching the expression of pity and uneasiness on the Englishman's face, "if I could dispose of a sum of ready money,—a thousand francs,—or say" (still narrowly watching Chester) "a couple of thousand *lire Italiane* in your beautiful paper money, my dear Masi, I believe I could compass the matter. A couple of thousand francs judiciously placed will do a good deal. And they would bear a high rate of interest. The speculation is good enough to afford that. But, *que voulez vous?* I am a poor devil to whom they don't even pay his pension regularly,—earned with the blood of a soldier. That's the worst of being hard up. For himself, an old soldier can bear it. But not to be able to help a friend at a pinch——!"

"*Basta, basta!*" interrupted Masi, almost roughly. He was revolted by this obvious appeal *in formâ pauperis* to Chester's well-filled purse. It was one thing to ask a man for a service in exchange for which he was offered a share in a good speculation, and another thing to whine and hint for his assistance in the tone of a begging-letter writer. "We've talked money long enough," proceeded Masi. "It gives me a bad taste in the mouth after a certain time. *Non olet? Per Bacco,* I think nothing stinks so foully as money!"

"*Affaire de gout,*" observed the Colonel, passing a dusky handkerchief, which had been whiter when the week was young, across his dyed moustache. "I rather like the smell of it."

Chester went away with a depression of spirits. He had no special regard for Masi, whom indeed he had scarcely known before that evening, as has been said: but he thought him a bright, engaging, friendly fellow. And it seemed a thousand pities to see him the comrade and dupe of Smith-Müller. Chester nourished an implacable antipathy against the gallant Colonel, which had risen from passive disgust to active detestation during the hour just passed in his society.

"I believe the fellow to be a consummate rascal, as he is obviously a consummate blackguard," said Chester to himself, as he left the office of the *Tribune of the People*. "His bullying is objectionable enough; but his cajolery is something too unspeakably revolting. One would like to have him flogged—by machinery. So that no decent hangman, or whoever it is, should be obliged to come too near him."

All this time William Chester had been lingering in Rome instead of proceeding to England. He said he was in no hurry. Why should he be in a hurry? There was no one waiting for him at home. His father and mother had both been dead for several years, and of his few remaining relatives he declared he thought Violet Moore was as near as any. But Miss

Baines, searching among her memories of the time when she had kept house for Violet's widowed father, and had talked with him about his family, reminded the young man of an Uncle John and a first-cousin Sarah, who, at the last reports, were living in Surrey, and who would surely rejoice to welcome back their returning kinsman. But William Chester remained insensible to the voice of Nature—if the voice of Nature was supposed to make him yearn for the society of relations whom he had never seen, and who had left him to shift for himself after his father's death. "I feel a great deal nearer to *you*," he said one day in answer to a speech of Miss Baines's on the subject. "When I used to hear my mother talk of your goodness to her cousin Henry Moore, and how devoted you were to his little motherless girl, she always spoke of you as 'Aunt Betsy.' I wish I might call you Aunt Betsy. It seems to come so natural! May I?"

"Oh, if you like. Oh yes, certainly," answered Betsy Baines in her constrained, shy way. It might have sounded rather a grudging permission in a stranger's ears. But Chester understood her, and was quite content. One standing excuse which he alleged for lingering on—although there did not appear to be any reason why he should allege an excuse at all—was that he had not yet seen all the sights of Rome. The fact was he spent more time at Aunt Betsy's lodgings than was compatible with much sight-seeing. What little he did in that way was done in company with the Higginses, in order, as he said, to profit by Violet's Italian, Mrs. Higgins not having yet, in her husband's phrase, "brought herself down to the inferior lingo of Rome," to the point of understanding much that was said in it.

Chester saw the girl under trying circumstances; between the blunt arrogance of her uncle, and the falsehood and affectation of Mrs. Higgins. He saw her gentle, unselfish, and generally cheerful, although at times there was an air of lassitude in her young

figure, and an expression of melancholy on her young face, which made him observe her anxiously. So far as he knew, Violet had scarcely any other society than that of her aunt and of Mr. and Mrs. Higgins. And the latter was an eternally jarring element. "There is nothing so exhausting to live with as humbug," thought Chester. "Of course it is not a cheerful life for a young girl." And the longing grew in his heart to take her away from it all into a happy home of her own; to surround her with tenderness and sympathy; to give her the support of an honest manful affection. He dreamt of persuading her to go back to India with him. And he pictured to himself how he would tell her that if Aunt Betsy would come too, she should be welcome to share their home. He had thought that the climate might be good for Miss Baines, who always suffered when it was cold and damp. They should have their winter home in Calcutta, and in summer go up to the hills. Three years more in India, he reckoned, would give him enough to insure him and his wife from poverty. And then he would come home and practise his profession from the vantage ground of a small independence. He could fancy the light in Violet's eyes, and the broad bright smile on her lips, when he should tell her how he had planned it all. Of course he often had moments of doubt and trepidation. But then again he would grow hopeful. Every true lover has to undergo such alternations. Violet was always sweet in her manner to him, and had come to treat him with a familiar kindness which she did not accord to other people. She appealed to his judgment; she asked his help for small services; she had even been confidential with him on the subject of some of Mrs. Higgins's astonishing manœuvres and deceptions.

Chester's thoughts were full of her as he passed through the streets, after leaving Masi, under the starlight of a fair Spring evening. It was not late,—

scarcely yet nine o'clock,—and he thought he might venture to call and inquire for Aunt Betsy.

He found Violet alone, sitting in a low chair near the empty stove, and with neither book nor work in her hands. This struck him, for she was never inactive. And although her face was not well illuminated by the one lamp which stood on the table, he got an impression that there were traces of tears on it. He had opened the door unannounced; for Mariuccia had arrived at the decision that she might spare herself any troublesome ceremonies in the case of a relation. And, indeed, she never spoke of him otherwise than as *Il Cugino*—the cousin.

"Oh, Cousin William, is it you?" said Violet. "I was afraid it was a stranger." Something indefinable in the tone of her voice confirmed his idea that she had been shedding tears.

"No; it isn't a stranger. May I come in?"

"Yes," she answered, after a second's hesitation.

He entered, and sat down near her, observing as he did so that she withdrew her head still more into the shadow. "I came to see how Aunt Betsy is this evening."

"She has a slight cold, but it is nothing. I am making her nurse herself."

"Is she in bed?"

"Yes; but she has only just gone."

Chester got up, bent over the low chair on which Violet was seated, and said gently, "Violet, what's the matter?"

There was no answer.

"You've been crying!"

"A little."

He sat down again close beside her. "What is it, dear? Do tell me! Do trust me!"

She silently put her handkerchief to her eyes. The sight of her tears hurt him terribly. He winced, and drew in his breath like a person suffering sharp physical pain. "Don't cry, dear! Don't cry! Tell me what is the matter. I may be able to help you."

She could not command herself to speak at the moment, but she laid her hand silently on the back of his, with a confiding gesture. He took her hand and held it while he spoke. "Violet, you are not happy. Your life is too uncongenial, your future too uncertain. You are always thinking of others. It is time some one thought of you. I think of you. I believe I have been thinking of you ever since the first day I saw you. Don't take away your hand, dear. Don't tremble. If you can love me a little and let me love you a great deal, we may be so happy, Violet. I do love you, dear —so much, so much; with every pulse of my heart. What is it, Violet?" he cried, in a startled tone. For she had suddenly wrenched her hand from his grasp, and pressed it to her throat, which was convulsed with hysterical sobs.

"Hush! Hush!" she gasped. "Don't say any more! Don't——" Then a burst of tears came to her relief, and after a moment she poured out the story of her love and her sorrow and her unhappy engagement, and her uncle's anger, and her anxieties for Masi. Her uncle had been there that evening. He had only just gone away. And he had said such hard things—not to her! No; he had been gentle with her: more gentle than she deserved. But he had spoken so hardly of Mario! "And now what you have said seems almost the cruellest to bear of all," she sobbed, pressing her hands to her temples, and turning her face away from him.

"Oh, Violet!" he stammered with trembling lips. "Oh, Violet!"

"Yes, it does. I have no one to help me now. I thought I could trust you. I thought you were like a brother to me; and that perhaps you would—you would try to help *him!*"

Chester was deadly pale under his sunburnt tint. His face and attitude had a peculiar stillness, as of a person half stunned. In all his hopes and fears and anticipations he had never expected this. He had scarcely seen Masi and Violet together. He had had no

hint, no suspicion to prepare him for this revelation. I was all over. All the visions in which his fancy had placed her as the central figure, busying itself with the minutest details that were to minister to her comfort and happiness,—all gone, shattered, swept away like a rosy sunset cloud before a cruel wind bringing darkness and cold. He would suffer more later on; for a violent blow dulls sensation at first. But even at that moment he felt for her. The piteous cry, "I have no one to help me now!" penetrated his heart.

"It seems strange to suppose that I should be less willing to help you, because I love you more than you thought, Violet," he answered quietly in a low voice, which all his will, and his courage, and his man's pride could not make quite steady.

She turned round, and, taking his hand, kissed it with a sudden, humble, penitent action. "Oh, I must seem a selfish, heartless wretch!" she cried. "I don't know what has come to me. But I do grieve that I have caused you any pain;—although, indeed,—indeed, I did not guess it. And I do appreciate your goodness and forbearance. I would give anything to make you forget that you had ever—ever thought of me in that way. But I cannot."

"Neither you nor any one else can do that, my child. The only thing you can do for me now is to trust me, just as you did before."

Trust him! Yes, she could trust him; but not quite as she had done before. She would have freely claimed brotherly help and counsel from him yesterday. But she shrank from making any demands on his sympathy to-day By degrees, however, he induced her to tell him more coherently what her uncle had said. Uncle Joshua had expressed the most decided disapprobation of her engagement. He could not forbid it, of course. He had no power over Violet. But he had told her that he should not only give her no money by way of dowry, but should cancel her name from his will, if she persisted in marrying Captain Masi.

"He may be brought to relent," said Chester slowly.

"I do not care for myself. I never built any hopes on his money. But it is very hard on Mario."

"As for that, I presume he did not propose to you because he thought you were rich." Chester could not bring himself to expend any pity on his favoured rival on that score.

"No, indeed. He knew I was a poor, penniless girl. But he has been making such sacrifices for my sake. Slaving at that newspaper, and sinking all his property in it. If Uncle Joshua would only give him some temporary assistance,—as a mere loan. But he is as hard as adamant against Mario."

After a pause Chester said, "Would you like me to speak to your uncle, Violet? I don't know that I can do any good. But I am willing, for your sake, to try."

She clasped her hands together. "Oh, how good you are,—how good you are! Uncle Joshua has such a high opinion of you,—likes you so much. I should not have dared to ask you——"

"What did you think I meant, then, when I said I loved you? I do love you, and I always shall. There, there; don't be afraid. I shall not trouble or distress you any more. But I don't mean to give up the privilege of being your friend, because I can't be happy as I had hoped,—I——"

His voice broke. He turned away. "Good-bye, my darling," he said hastily.

"Not 'good-bye,' Cousin William."

"Yes; good-bye. I shall see you again to-morrow, please God. But it is 'good-bye,' for all that."

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. HIGGINS had made up his mind that his niece Violet should not marry Captain Masi. Some difficulty there might be in carrying out this resolution, but he did not admit the idea of ultimate failure. He did not, however, refuse to discuss the subject with William Chester—a great proof of his esteem for that young man.

"No, no, Chester," said he, "this Captain Marsy won't do at all. A pleasant fellow enough, but not suitable for Violet's husband."

Chester gently endeavoured to suggest that perhaps on that subject Violet's opinion might be of paramount importance. But Uncle Joshua wouldn't hear of it. "The female character," said he, "is weak, and requires guidance. Violet is truth itself, by nature, but he got influence enough over her to make her deceive me, in a way. He's shifty, you see. I can't say that he told me a direct lie, but he let me think what wasn't true. Directly I spoke with her out came the truth! This love-making has been going on for months. No, no; it won't do. I won't have it."

"I'm afraid she will be very unhappy," said Chester.

"Not so unhappy as if she married Marsy," said Uncle Joshua, confidently.

"But do you suppose that you shall be able to break it off, Mr. Higgins?"

"Certainly. I have a plan in my head. I shan't mind a little expense. I told Violet I wouldn't give her a penny nor yet bequeath her a penny, if she married this man. But I'm not avaricious. She knows that. It isn't the money I care for. I've always behaved liberal to every one—especially to my family." But as to the details of his plan Mr.

Higgins declined to explain himself. They would see. Least said, soonest mended.

It was not in human nature Chester should not feel a momentary elation at the thought of Violet's engagement being broken—a reviving gleam of hope. But it was but momentary. If Violet and her lover remained firm, no one had power to part them. The girl had a courageous and faithful nature. And as for him—it wasn't conceivable that he should give up Violet! To Chester's mind the poor girl's prospects looked terribly dark. Let the matter end how it would, he feared she would be unhappy. All that he had seen and heard at the newspaper office recurred to his mind with a new and vivid light on it. Masi was an infinitely more interesting person to him now than he had been on that evening, and he recalled the minutest details of the hour he had spent there. He felt heart-sick and miserable.

Presently Mrs. Joshua Higgins came sailing and rustling into the room. She was full of astonishment, full of indignation, full of regret, full of anxiety. Of course Mr. Chester had heard the news? As a member of the family he would naturally feel it. But what her (Jane Higgins's) feelings were, no one could imagine! She had not slept for thinking of it. She had been ill—positively ill! It had brought on her nerves! What hurt her most cruelly of all was the duplicity of the thing. She herself was sincere to a fault. If there was one thing more foreign to her nature than another, it was secrecy—deception. She almost feared she should never be able to forgive Betsy Baines. Betsy Baines was really the most to blame. How she could have gone on looking her confiding uncle in the face, Mrs. Higgins was at a loss to imagine. And so on in a flow of words which threatened to be inexhaustible; the more so, that having said all she had to say never appeared to Mrs. Higgins a reason for holding her tongue.

Her husband did not relish this attack on his nieces.

He had often boasted that Violet was "a genuine Higgins" in respect of truthfulness, and had even held her up to Jane as a model. And that ingenuous lady was now taking her revenge. Her tirade, however, had one effect that she had not reckoned on; it caused Mr. Higgins to spare Betsy Baines many reproaches. His wife's voluble animadversions roused a spirit of contradiction in him. He did not choose that his niece should be scolded by any one but himself. "Women," said he, "are always in extremes, Jane Higgins. It's lucky they are not called on to judge; for judgment is sadly wanting in them. You leave it to me to form my own opinions, and act according."

"I *hope* all may turn out well!" said Mrs. Higgins, with a mournful shake of the head. "But really I tremble. Violet—dear child!—is sadly obstinate."

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't expect her to be willing to marry a man one day, and drop him the next quite cool and unconcerned!" said Mr. Higgins, sharply. And then it occurred to his wife that she was not producing exactly the effect she wished, and had better be silent.

. . . . . .

Chester walked miles that day along the dusty roads outside Rome, absorbed in painful thoughts, seeing little of the scenes he passed through. Trying to put the case fairly before his own mind, he told himself that if Violet had been his sister he should still have thought the match an ill-advised one, and that he was not bribed by jealousy and disappointment to think so. But Violet was not his sister. He was deeply in love with her, and he had told her so. How could he try to dissuade her from this marriage now? If he were willing to incur the odium of doing so, he stood at a disadvantage with Violet for the task. Chester had a deep nature, not easily ruffled by surface breezes. But it was stirred to its depths now And his agitation was both more painful and more enduring than that of a shallower character can ever be. He had turned,

and was walking back towards Rome along the dusty Via Flaminia, when he was startled by a loud shout, and leaped aside only just in time to avoid the wheel of a carriage drawn by a spirited horse, which dashed past him, and then was suddenly pulled up a few paces further on. He saw a hand beckoning to him from the window, and a delicate face crowned with waving masses of dark hair looking out. He recognized Madame Guarini, at whose house he had been several times since his first introduction there.

"Mr. Chester, I am so glad to find you," said Nina. "Let me carry you back to the town." He would have excused himself, but she insisted. "Pray, pray come into the carriage. Never mind your dusty shoes. I so much want to speak to you about Violet." He jumped in and seated himself beside her.

Chester expected that Madame Guarini was about to speak of the troubles consequent on the discovery of Violet's engagement; he knew her to be an intimate friend of his cousin. But to his surprise she began by asking him if he could guess what cause of anger Captain Masi had against her (Nina Guarini). "A fancied cause, it must be," she said. "For I have never treated him otherwise than as a true friend." She went on to tell him that she had had a letter from Masi late the previous night—at past eleven o'clock. It was very violent and reproachful, and made some mysterious allusions to treason and bad faith on her part in the matter of a certain Company in which Masi had had shares, but with the details of which she need not trouble Mr. Chester. "But all that is not the worst. Masi will find out his mistake some day, and come round. Even if he does not—*pazienza!* I have never done him an ill turn, so I bear him no malice. What really distresses me is his forbidding Violet to see me or speak to me on pain of his sovereign displeasure!"

"Forbidding Violet to speak to you!"

"Those are his words. And she confirms them.

Here is a note from her. That faithful creature, Kitty Low, brought it this morning, and told me at the same time of all the troubles they were in with the uncle. Ah, *poveretta, poveretta!* Please read Violet's note."

Chester, in profound astonishment, read as follows:—

"I don't know how to say it to you, but it must be said. Mario forbids me to come to you any more unless I would break with him altogether. He is so excited, and irritable and angry, that I can obtain nothing clear from him, but he says you have betrayed him, and done him harm. Oh, Signora Nina, what can it be? I am sure he is mistaken. I know it. You are incapable—I am crying so that I scarcely see what I am writing. Have patience a little while. It will be cleared up, it must be. Don't be too angry with Mario. He is deceived. I am so unhappy—not only for myself, but I seem to bring trouble to every one.

"VIOLET MOORE."

The young man looked up bewildered after finishing this note. "I see you know nothing of this," said Nina.

"I am stunned by it. Has Captain Masi gone mad?"

"Ah, *Dio mio!* This is a weary world. And the best thing I ever heard of the next is that there is no marrying nor giving in marriage in it."

"I gather that you think my cousin's engagement an unfortunate one."

"I can't deny it."

"I fear you have a very unfavourable opinion of Captain Masi."

"*Intendiamoci!* Let us understand each other. In some respects Masi is a good fellow. His code is not your code, but he has one: a little *en l'air*, perhaps; made up of prejudices rather than principles; not very reasonable, not very wise;—a code which has renounced religion as irrational, but retains an unshakeable faith in the power of the evil eye. And yet, with all that,

Masi is a man who would sooner die,—I mean it literally,—than be dishonoured, as he understands honour."

Chester pressed his hand to his forehead. "Do you know," he asked after a pause, "how Captain Masi's affairs really stand? How his newspaper prospers? I fear he is terribly embarrassed."

Nina shook her head. Her husband had told her at one time that there seemed to be a chance of some political men of Masi's party taking him up. In that case he might be rescued from debt. But, as a commercial speculation, the newspaper would never pay.

"In that case, it would surely be the wisest plan for him to give it up altogether," said Chester.

"Undoubtedly it would. I have told him so."

"Then why on earth doesn't he?" asked Chester, knitting his brows.

"He is an exceptional man who does not always act wisely," replied Nina in her dry, sarcastic voice. Then, after a second, she added, "But the fact is, that in this case there is mixed up a notion of honour, as he thinks. He clings to it, because—because——"

"Because he is unwilling to throw his staff out of work, and hopes to pull through and pay every one? I see. I can understand the feeling. But it is a mistake. They will only suffer more at last."

"It isn't exactly that," said Nina, with an odd look. "The truth is, Masi has so completely identified himself with the journal, has put so much pride and *amour propre* into its success—has rushed into the thing with the inexperience of a rash boy, fancying he was a match for—" she checked the name of Peretti on her lips. She was not going to revile any of "the party" to this stranger. "In short, he was a tool where he fancied himself a master. And now his notion is—I know him so well—that it would humiliate and disgrace him,—like abandoning his colours on the field,—to give it up."

"But—that seems to me to be mere selfish vanity," said Chester.

"I told you his code was not your code," answered Nina gravely.

"If he were alone it might be forgiven. But is Violet to be sacrificed to this foolish egotism?"

Nina was silent. But when Chester turned his face away, gazing out of the carriage window with knitted brows, she looked at him long and scrutinizingly, and the suspicion came into her mind that his feeling for Violet was something more than cousinly. After a long silence, and just as they were about to enter the city by the Porta del Popolo, Chester asked the Signora if she were acquainted with a certain Colonel Smith-Müller. She answered that she was not, but that she had heard him mentioned by Masi and others. Chester unhesitatingly expressed the most unfavourable opinion of the Colonel, and added that he thought he exercised a pernicious influence over Captain Masi.

"What sort of influence?" asked Nina.

"Well, it is hard to define. He pretends to have secret political information. And he is full of extravagant schemes for making money. He was talking of one the other night—I'm not at liberty to mention what it was, for it was confided to me as a secret,—which I thought wild nonsense."

Nina gave him a quick, keen look. "Did they ask you to put money into it? Ah, well, never mind. You need not answer that question."

"I am bound to say, at all events, that Captain Masi did not press anything of the kind, but checked Smith-Müller when he tried it."

"Just like Masi. He is far too proud to importune you in that way."

"It occurred to me,—whether it might be possible that this vagabond, who calls himself a colonel, had prejudiced Masi against you?"

"Oh! Most unlikely! Why should he? I never saw him in my life. What countryman is he? A German?"

"He says he's a Servian. But, if I were asked to

make a guess, I should say he was Russian. Perhaps a Russian spy."

Nina's face changed. The words revived painful associations in her mind.

"Humph! *C'est une idée*," she said thoughtfully. "I cannot say I think it very likely, but, still—I will inform myself about this man. Meanwhile, if you see Violet tell her that I love her the same as ever. Don't let her think ill of me if you can help it."

CHAPTER XXXI.

PRINCE MASSIMO NASONI was in an ill humour. He had had a disagreeable interview with his lawyer. His creditors were troublesome. His mother had reproached him bitterly for the sale of the land at Mattoccia; not so much, indeed, for the fact of the sale, as because he had kept it secret, and because the money, instead of replenishing the family coffers, had disappeared from the Prince's possession with extraordinary celerity, leaving "not a rack (even in the shape of a receipted bill) behind." And he had observed some new wrinkles on looking at himself in the glass that morning. The Prince had not been his old cheerful, *insouciant* self ever since his interview with Nina Guarini. Unavailing regrets stirred in his heart. He would have liked to have had Nina for a friend still. He had not the slightest thought of reviving their old tenderness. That was dead and buried, and its ghost did not haunt him. But, somehow, he had a vague idea that it ought to haunt her; at all events, to the extent of softening her manner to him and giving her a sentimental interest in him. As to the wrong he had done her—his abandonment of her alone, young, and friendless, in a city like Paris; the cruel shock to her of his marriage, the breaking of all his vows—that did not

greatly trouble his attention. She had consoled herself very soon, he said to himself.

But all his old admiration for her sense and quickness, for the energy and promptitude of her character, so contrasted with his own, had been revived and strengthened by that one interview. And he thought how good it would have been for him to have such a woman by his side, devoted to his interests, zealous for his welfare. He knew that he was fleeced right and left; having never been able, as he put it to himself, to endure the sordid struggles over every item of expenditure, which his son Ciccio faced with such a dogged determination not to be cheated. His mother, to be sure, would have been more than willing to regulate his expenditure and economize his means. But her stewardship did not suit him; for the old Princess, who made all kinds of personal sacrifices herself, could not be got to see why Massimo should not make any. Prince Nasoni, in his acute sensibility to his own discomfort, considered it very hard that Fate should have deprived him of Nina, who would have been such an invaluable friend, such a charming companion, for his latter years. What good had his noble marriage done for him? It had produced an heir to the illustrious name of Nasoni. But the heir was an uncongenial, undutiful young man, who had never shown the slightest affection for *him*. Prince Nasoni came very near to considering himself a martyr to his high sense of the claims of ancient lineage, and the social duties incumbent on a Roman Prince. There are some natures that never can be brought to see that the impossibility of eating one's cake and having it is not a special cruelty and injustice in their own particular case.

The Prince was sitting at breakfast about half-past twelve o'clock in the day, when his servant announced that a lady desired to speak with him for a few minutes, if he were disengaged.

"What lady?" asked the Prince sharply.

He did not expect anything agreeable from the visit

of a lady. He had recently been baited between his own lawyer and a hostile lawyer, as to the real ownership of a certain villa, which a fair claimant swore the Prince had bestowed on her absolutely. His own lawyer urged him to resist. The hostile lawyer urged him to yield; threatening the publication of letters, and the institution of a scandalous suit. And the Prince, at length wearied out, and shrinking more from a public scandal than he would have done twenty years ago, had secretly compromised the matter with the lady, to the unspeakable discontent of both the lawyers, and at the sacrifice of an important sum of money. "What lady?" said he again, half fearing to see the occupant of the disputed villa appear behind the servant in the doorway.

"The lady says her name is of no consequence, but I was to tell your Excellency that she called some time ago, to arrange the business about Mattoccio."

The Prince sprang to his feet. "Ask the lady to do me the favour to walk in here," he said. And advancing to the door, he received the Signora Guarini with a profoundly respectful bow, apologized for the breakfast on the table, placed a chair for her, and, in a word, put on his most princely air of distant courtesy. But the moment the servant had left the room, he held out his hand eagerly, exclaiming, "Oh, Nina, what a joyful surprise! Do you know I was thinking of you but a moment ago!"

"Really, Prince?" said she, apparently not observing his proffered hand, "I ought to apologize for intruding on you in this improvised way. But the fact is, I did not want to lose time by making an appointment beforehand. And I thought I might venture to take my chance."

Cool, clear-eyed, self-possessed, perfectly civil, but no more soft or sentimental than the smooth, bright diamonds in her ears! The Prince felt chilled and rebuffed. But he had tact enough to accept the cue she gave him. "I can only repeat," he said, seating himself, "what I told you on a former occasion. I look

upon your visits as a favour and an honour. And if I could flatter myself that I could do you the slightest service I should esteem myself fortunate."

"That is very good of you. The last errand I came to you on did not turn out so badly,—did it, Prince?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I got into dreadful hot water about that sale, Signora," said he. "The abominable democratic newspapers—— I beg your pardon; I don't wish to say anything offensive, but, really, the unbounded license of the Liberal Press is something frightful!" The Prince was alluding chiefly to some attack on himself in the *Tribune of the People;* wherein it was set forth—to the eternal disgrace of the Ministry, said the *Tribune*—how the chief gainer by the shameful comedy of the Pontine Marshes Company had been, as usual, one of the Black Aristocracy; the enemy of his country, the fanatical adherent to a grotesque and effete tyranny, and so forth. There had also been coarse and still more personal articles in a low periodical, which announced itself (not at all superfluously) to be "humourous." The Clerical journals had spared the Prince, being aware of the desirability of union in their ranks, and unwilling to make common cause with the "revolutionists" against a good son of the Church. But he had not escaped some severe reproofs in private. And he had come to a sharp quarrel with Pietro Carlovingi on the subject; which quarrel had with difficulty been patched up. All this Nina knew very well. But she knew also that the Prince had not made a bad bargain through her intervention.

"Well," she said placidly, "I suppose some annoyance was to be expected.—But you had the money, you know."

"Yes; I had the money," returned the Prince with a rueful grimace. "*Had* it, very distinctly in the past tense. I don't know how it is that I cannot keep money. I never could."

"Some persons are more unfortunate still; they can't get it," observed Nina.

"Oh, and I am beset by people of all sorts, who beg of me on the most extraordinary pretexts," continued the Prince, feeling it rather a relief to pour out his grievances to a listener who, if not softly sympathetic, still did not lecture him like his lawyer, nor severely recommend him to the interposition of the saints like his mother, nor sulkily reproach him with squandering the family estates like his son, nor cry, "give, give," like that daughter of the horse-leech who had tried to seize on his villa. "For the last ten days I have been receiving a series of anonymous letters urging me to give the writer an interview, when he would reveal matters of the greatest importance; and invariably winding up with a demand for assistance in money, to be sent to certain initials, Poste Restante."

"It is easy to take no notice of them."

"Well, I have taken no notice of them. But their tone has risen in a rapid *crescendo,* from whining to bullying—almost threatening."

"In that case I should communicate with the police."

"I don't want to have anything to say to your police," answered the Prince. "In the old times I should have known what to do. But, now, these gentry would delight in dragging my name through the mire."

Nina did not insist. She understood very well that Prince Nasoni had too many weak points in his armour to be willing to brave publicity if it could be avoided; since there was no knowing what damaging facts might come out. "Well," said she, "I won't detain you longer than is needful. I merely came to ask you a question. A person in whom I am interested has quarrelled with me, for no cause that I can discover. I can only—after much pondering and puzzling—make a guess that he has heard of the part I took in negotiating the sale of Mattoccia, and resents my having kept it secret. But I was bound to keep it secret. I had promised secrecy to you, and to others. The person in question has no reason to complain of me in the matter. On the contrary, I rendered him a

substantial service. But he does not know that. And I don't wish him to know it. In consequence of a thought that occurred to me, I resolved to come to you and ask you if you had chanced to mention to any one my part in the transaction."

The Prince drew himself up. "I, Signora? It was agreed between us that the affair should be kept secret, as you yourself observed just now. I gave you my word."

"Yes, I know. But I thought it just possible that——"

"That I should break my word, Signora!" began the Prince in his haughtiest tone, when catching Nina's gaze fixed upon him with a singular expression he stopped short, almost with a gasp, and a deep crimson flush spread itself over his pale olive-coloured face. His confusion was so painful that for a moment he literally could not speak. Nina remained outwardly unmoved as adamant. There was something cruel in her cold clear look. In reality, she pitied Massimo at that moment. But she told herself that her pity was a mere weak emotion of the nerves, unjustifiable, and almost contemptible. This temperament of Massimo's, so susceptible of pain from any hurt to his personal pride, so capable of feeling the humiliation of a false position even to anguish, so *in*capable of voluntarily enduring suffering for the sake of any other human being—what did it merit but contempt? She knew that remorse had no share in that burning blush, that stammering tongue. She purposely steeled herself by recalling the past—how she had been left to suffer alone, and to fall into an abyss of misery—perhaps of nameless degradation—but for Beppe Guarini's faithful, timely help. Nina could be tender, but she could also be hard. Injustice roused every fibre in her nature to revolt. She was not angelic. Her magnanimity often sufficed her to forgive, but seldom prevented her from despising. "I did not suppose you intended to break faith," she said slowly, after a pause which seemed

pitilessly long to Prince Massimo Nasoni. "But people have moments of weakness—of forgetfulness. A word might have slipped out. But if you assure me it was not so, I shall believe you."

"It was not so, indeed," he said, in a muffled voice, while he passed a handkerchief across and across his face.

"Then, either I am on the wrong track altogether, or some one else has spoken indiscreetly. Could Gino Peretti——? *Basta!* You will forgive me for troubling you?"

"How can you ask?" he answered. But the spirit and grace of his manner were quenched. He was still quivering with mortification at that unfortunate speech. Nina rose, and, vanquished by a movement of compassion, offered him the hand she had before refused.

"Good-bye, Prince; and thank you," she said, gently. The tears rushed to his eyes, and to hide them he bowed low over her hand.

As he did so, the servant entered with a letter in a square blue envelope, bearing the print of a dirty thumb and forefinger, and smelling strongly of tobacco.

"What is this?" said the Prince, at once recovering his haughty carriage of the head. "What do you mean by bringing me this now?"

"*Eccellenza*," murmured the man, "the bearer is waiting. He said it was most urgent; that you would understand, *Eccellenza*——"

"Enough! You will not return here on any pretext until I ring for you. I am engaged." Then when the servant was gone he turned to Nina, eager to make a diversion from the unpleasant constraint which oppressed him. "This is an odd coincidence," he said. "Just as I had spoken to you about my anonymous persecutor, he sends me another letter. I should like you to see a specimen of his style." The Prince tore open the gummed envelope, with an expression of disgust at its odour of coarse tobacco. "Aha!" he exclaimed, as soon as he had glanced at it. "He has

ceased to be anonymous! Here's a signature. Alexis —Alexis—what the deuce is this name?—Smith-Müller?"

"Is it possible?" cried Nina.

"Well, it sounds impossible; but that is what he writes!"

"Strange! I have been anxious to get some information about that man."

"Shall I have him in here?"

Nina hesitated. "I don't know him by sight," she said. "But he may know me. I think I would rather he did not see me here."

"I'll send him away, then." And the Prince laid his hand on the bell.

"Stay!" said Nina. "See what he says. Your servant spoke of urgent business."

"Oh, his urgent business is to get money, I suppose. That's the urgent business of most of us." He looked again at the letter. "He says he has 'something to communicate which concerns some one very dear to me.' Who is there very dear to me?" said the Prince, half aloud; raising his handsome elderly face with the blankness of that dreary question on it, as the moral and outcome of his life. "Oh, I suppose it's a mere invention. But he is very urgent. Only asks for an interview this time, not for money."

"Is it possible," thought Nina, "that this vulgar writer of begging and threatening letters can be the companion and mentor of Mario Masi? If I could make sure, I might open Masi's eyes, and save him from this scheming rascal!" Then she said aloud, "I am curious to see this man. And my curiosity is not idle. I have a good reason for it."

"Will you go into that little ante-room?" said Prince Massimo.

"There's a way out of it into the corridor. And, if the door is left a little way open, you can see him before you leave the house, without his seeing you."

"Yes," said Nina promptly. "I will wait until he

comes in here, and then make my escape. I begin to see already that the information I wanted on this man's score will be all of one tint, and that black."

"If I learn anything worth telling you, you shall know it."

"Good-bye. And thank you once again."

She passed into the ante-room, bare of all furniture save a bench running round the walls, and intended for the use of the domestics-in-waiting, in the days when Palazzo Nasoni had sheltered an army of retainers.

The Prince ordered the bearer of the note to be shown in. And noticing the servant's inquiring glance round the room, said, "You need not attend the lady to the door. She is gone. I conducted her myself to the private staircase."

The case was not so unprecedented as to cause much surprise in any member of the Prince's establishment. The man bowed, withdrew, and presently returned ushering in Colonel Smith-Müller.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE Colonel advanced into the room with rather more than his usual swagger—a not uncommon manifestation of secret uneasiness. He had given his rusty moustachios a new coat of dye; and they were black as coals on his red, bloated visage. Moreover he wore a double eyeglass of the kind called a *pince-nez*, with tinted glasses, which concealed his restless, twinkling eyes, and a good deal altered his physiognomy.

The Prince received him standing, and with the slightest possible inclination of the head. "I will ask you to be brief," he said, without any preliminary salutation. "I am greatly occupied."

The Colonel put down his hat on a side table, walked

few paces up and down the room, puffed out his reath noisily once or twice, uttered two or three xpletives, and finally said, "This is a painful position, rince, for a man like me to find himself in. I hold commission. I have served in the field. I am an ld soldier and a man of honour. I have not been sed to wait in ante-chambers, nor to be received on ifferance. Hah! Such is life. The fortune of ar!"

"I will merely point out to you, Monsieur—Monsieur mith-Müller, that the writer of anonymous letters uts himself outside the pale of courtesies in use mongst gentlemen. And, in fact, I should not have eceived you at all if your latest communication had not een signed. Sit down there, if you please."

The Prince pointed to a chair, on which the light of ie window fell full, and so placed that its occupant ould be well seen from the ante-room. But Smith-Müller did not take that chair. He muttered some-ning about a weakness in the eyes which compelled im to wear smoked glasses, and made the glare painful. nd he sat down with his face in shadow and his back the light.

"Now, sir," said the Prince. "May I again request ou to be as brief as possible?"

Colonel Smith-Müller coughed very loud, and gave noisy sigh. "Prince," said he, "the chances of life ave put me in possession of some very singular bits f secret information, which I have always endeavoured use for the benefit of my fellow-creatures. For yself, I can say that my fellow-creatures have de-erved devilish little consideration at my hands. I ave been hardly treated. I have been the victim of nmerited treachery. I had a fine social position hich was ruined by—— Well, well, all this does not nterest you. I shall come to the point." He got up, nd again moved restlessly about the room, mopping is face with a handkerchief which he had rolled into ball between his palms. As he turned in his walk,

he stopped at the breakfast-table, and saying "Permit me! I am parched, and suffering from nervous excitement," poured out a tumbler-full of French wine, which he tossed down at a draught. He drew a long breath after it, which was almost a groan, and then resuming his seat, said suddenly, "You were in Vienna in your youth, Prince."

Massimo started violently. He had expected nothing less than this allusion. "Yes," he answered, with an extra dash of hauteur. "What then?"

"Some romantic circumstances occurred there within my knowledge—an elopement which made some noise at the time," continued the other man. The draught of wine seemed to have steadied his nerves; for he sat and spoke more firmly, and his eyes glittered more steadily behind the tinted glasses. "It is many years ago, now. Both parties are married since—not to each other, as I need scarcely say to a man of the world like Prince Massimiliano Nasoni!" And the Colonel laughed his dry unsmiling laugh.

Massimo was in a fever of agitation, thinking of Nina's presence in the adjoining room, where every word spoken by that fellow must be as audible to her as it was to himself. He rose from his chair, and said brusquely, "I decline to listen to any more of this. If you persist I shall ring for my servants to make you withdraw."

For a moment Smith-Müller looked at the position of the bell, and of the door, as though calculating the possibilities of intercepting the Prince before he could summon assistance. But seeing the door of the ante-room, and perceiving that Nasoni had an egress that way, he relinquished the half-formed purpose, and changed his tone to one of entreaty. "I pray you, Prince! One moment. It was necessary to say those words, in order to prepare you for what is to come," he said, rising also. "You had better hear me,—*for the sake of the lady,* in whom I have reason to believe you still take an interest! If I am wrong there,—if the

person in question is indifferent to you, then you are right in dismissing me, and I had better go elsewhere."

The Prince paused irresolute; wondering whether Nina were still within earshot, or had gone away after taking one look at Smith-Müller; doubtful whether it would not be best to let her hear what passed if she were still there. The other man, seizing the opportunity of the Prince's indecision, went on rapidly in short sentences, keeping at the same time a keen watch on Nasoni lest he should suddenly spring to the bell.

"I told you both the parties were married since then. But the woman was a wife already at the time of the elopement. She left a husband at Vienna." Here he poured out a string of unuttered execrations in two or three languages, and going to the table, helped himself to a second draught of wine.

"Well?" said Massimo, "what of that? The husband died."

The Colonel set down the empty glass so violently as to break it. "He did *not* die. I know him. He is alive. The woman is a bigamist."

"*Santo Dio!*" exclaimed Massimo in a whisper. And he fell back in his chair as if he had received a physical blow.

"Aha! You see that I was right!" said the Colonel, following up his effect. "It was worth while to hear me, eh? Some credit was due to an old soldier and a man of honour, eh? *Parbleu!* Some men would have taken you at your word, and left you without another syllable. But I am too generous,—too forgiving. I have forgiven too much. And with such cards in my hand, too! But there is a limit. I act for my friend, that injured husband, and I demand—observe, I *demand*. I do not implore,—an immediate subsidy for him. He is poor. He endures privations. *Sacré——!* When I think of that, and of others rolling in luxury, it makes me frenzied,—frenzied!" And he ramped up and down the room like a maniac; but never all the

time so losing his self-possession as to remove a watchful side-glance from the Prince.

"Hush, hush," said the latter, nervously, "you must be more tranquil. I cannot allow this violence." He pressed his hand to his forehead like a man bewildered. when in a low tone he asked, "Who else knows this, besides you?"

Smith-Müller stopped at once in his wild career, and laid his finger to his nose, with a gesture familiar with him. "Not another living being," he answered in a hoarse whisper. "No one but me,—and the husband, of of course. I am the sole depositary of the secret. You asked a practical question, Prince. You can safely make terms with me. I am empowered. I have full powers."

"Why did you come to me?"

"From a feeling of—of chivalry. I am an old soldier, and a man——" Here he was interrupted by a violent hiccough. "A man of honour. And I was willing to spare the woman, if possible!"

"But why to *me?*" repeated the Prince, looking at him with a rising feeling of disgust, and the sort of fascination of repulsion which one feels in watching some foul reptile.

"Because I believed you were actuated by nobler sentiments than that *roturier* rascal Guarini. He is a paltry peddling rogue; and a poltroon besides. All that *blague* about his campaigns as a volunteer,—bah! Trash! Lies!"

"Keep to the point, sir!" said the Prince sternly.

"That *is* the point. I could not trust Guarini. He might have entrapped me by false promises. I don't know that my life would have been safe in Guarini's hands, if I had told him, as I have told you, that I was the only man who knew this. I came to you, Prince, believing you to have feelings of chivalry,—like myself; and perhaps some feeling more tender towards the lady. I did not wish to publish the story, if matters could be accommodated. I—*Bon Dieu*, I am in so excited a state that—permit me!"

He had emptied the bottle of Bordeaux, but looking over the table he espied a small decanter of Cognac with a liqueur glass near it, intended to measure out the *chasse* for the Prince's cup of black coffee which stood cold and untasted on the table. He seized the decanter and poured out a dram, which he swallowed. "Yes, yes, I had faith in you, Prince. I believed that rather than expose the lady to a tremendous *esclandre*—in which your own name would be mixed up; for my friend has suffered much wrong in silence, but there is a limit. And he has *me*," (slapping his breast violently,) "to watch over his interests. I say I had faith in your being ready to behave like a gentleman and a Prince."

"What is it you demand? And what is it you offer?" asked Massimo, still staring at him with the same look of mingled disgust and fascination.

"A sum of money, to be agreed upon, paid down; and an undertaking not to molest the parties in question."

"Where is—your friend, at this moment?"

"He could be produced, if necessary. You shall have proof, at any rate, of his existence. Meanwhile I can produce his letters, empowering me——"

"Where is he? Perhaps you do not know yourself!"

"Pardon me! I—ahem!—I know perfectly. We are in constant correspondence."

"I ask you for the third time where he is."

"At this moment? He is far away, poor fellow! Enduring unmerited privations. At this moment he is—in Croatia."

"It is false. He is much nearer," said a voice that arrested the Colonel's hand in the act of carrying a second dram of brandy to his mouth. Nina was standing close to them with one hand on the table, erect and firm; her face white as that of a corpse, her eyes full of burning indignation fixed on Smith-Müller.

"Oho!" muttered the latter, with his shifty glance wandering hither and thither, but never for one moment meeting hers fully. "Oho! an ambush. A

coup de théâtre! I should hardly have expected this from you, Prince; but from Madame, one may be prepared for anything." But, despite his audacity, his dirty hand shook as he finished his interrupted dram and put the glass down; and the coarse red hue of his face had changed to a dull mottled pallor.

"Nina, why have you exposed yourself to this?" said the Prince to her in a low voice.

"Do you not know him?" she returned, still with her burning eyes fixed on the other man's face. "The years have changed his looks since you first saw him, and he has done something to change them himself. But he is the same Casimir Laszinski still: false, and cruel, and greedy, and abject! A renegade to his country, a spy, a thief, a convict——"

"And your husband!" he roared, interrupting her with a brutal threatening action of his clenched fist. Massimo made a step forward, but she stopped him with a little backward movement of her hand, very slight and contemptuous. She confronted the other man with a look of concentrated scorn and hatred, utterly devoid of fear. Her anger was of so much rarer and intenser a quality than his, that it seemed literally to extinguish it as the sun puts out terrestrial fires.

"It was you, then," she continued; "this begging-letter writer, this anonymous threatener, this cajoling, bullying schemer, whom I have heard of from time to time under a feigned name here; doing harm—what else did you ever do?—and spreading dissension, and instilling suspicion! You, Casimir Laszinski, whom I thought dead, righteously shot down, and the world well rid of him."

She was quick to observe and note that he winced and glanced round uneasily at every utterance of his real name.

"If you ask why he kept his secret all these years, I do not know with certainty, but I guess that he spent the greater part of them in the galleys."

The Colonel struck his hand on the table with a horrible oath. "It's a lie!" he stammered. "Old soldier!—Field of honour."

"Perhaps, too, there was little to be gained. Beppe and I were poor. We led a struggling, wandering life."

Again he stuttered out an oath. The brandy—to which he had continued to help himself—was having its effect. "Not true—wicked falsehood! How should I know where you and that scoundrel had hidden yourselves? I searched for you through — through Europe."

"Whatever his motive was," she continued, utterly unheeding his words, but keeping her eyes inexorably riveted on his face; "one thing only is sure: it was a bad and base one. Why he came to you I *can* tell you. He came, because he thought to play upon your feelings, your pride, your memory of old times. Fear, or compassion, or disgust,—it was all one what feeling he aroused in you, so that the result was cash to him."

The Colonel nodded ironically, with a half-insolent, half-abject, wholly repulsive smile. Then he folded his arms, and shook his head with a drivelling attempt at dignity.

"If there be one man on earth whom one would have supposed that even Casimir Laszinski would have shrunk from importuning for alms, you are that man," resumed Nina. "But he was past all human visitings of shame long ago. How much I fear him you can see. How much he fears us, you may divine from the fact of his having been in Rome so long, and never made one appeal to my husband——"

"Your husband!" shouted the Colonel, with a sudden lighting-up of intelligence in his soddened face. "*I* am your husband! Most unfortunate of men!" And his head dropped forward on his folded arms, as if he were falling into a heavy sleep.

Massimo Nasoni was trembling from head to foot, and great drops of perspiration stood on his forehead.

"Tell me, Nina," he said, catching at her dress as she was sweeping out at the door. "Tell me this one thing! You did not,—you did not know this man was living when you married Guarini?"

She looked at him with a gleam of surprise in her face. "Know it? No. If you ask me whether I thought his death as well proven as Guarini thought it, again I should have to answer 'No.' I had a feeling all the time that it was too good a thing to have happened to me. For years I expected to see him reappear, day after day, week after week. The feeling wore off at length. But it was prophetic, as you see."

"And your—your marriage to Guarini in Paris—?"

"Well?"

"Was it merely a civil rite?"

"No; there was a good old Polish priest—an exile—who had prepared me for my first Communion, and whom my poor father had helped out of our poverty, who knew my story. He was a sincere and earnest man; and he did not gloss over what he held to be my sins. But when I was free—as we thought—he asked me to let him bless my new marriage—for he loved me. He is dead."

The Prince clasped his hands. "Oh, Nina, what a fearful misfortune! But you were innocent—you did not know that you were committing bigamy."

She raised her head with a haughty movement. "Do you suppose that I held myself bound in any case to *that!*" And she pointed with her forefinger to Laszinski, now heavily snoring with his head upon the table.

"N—no, no. Not to—to live with him. But a Catholic marriage, Nina! Marriage is a sacrament of the Church!"

She looked at him gravely; then at the drunken figure sprawling on the table. Then she gently disengaged her dress from his grasp, and went out without a word.

After awhile, the sleeper stirred, and rubbed his hands through his hair, and looked up blinking at Prince Massimo Nasoni watching him irresolutely; fluctuating between a hot impulse to summon the servants and have him dragged out and thrust from the door, and a chill terror of adding another to the many scandals of Casa Nasoni, and furnishing the subject of Roman gossip from Trastevere to the Esquiline.

The Colonel (for we may continue so to style him) was used to sleep off drunken fits pretty quickly. He made a clumsy grab at the *caraffe* of water on the table, and succeeded in pouring some into a glass. He drank half of the contents, and then proceeded to sprinkle some of them on his face; and to the Prince's unspeakable disgust, he dipped a corner of the tablecloth into the water and smeared his forehead and ears with it. "A-a-a-h!" he exclaimed, drawing a long breath, and rising more steadily than might have been expected, with the assistance of one hand on the table. "I shall now, Prince—for the present—withdraw. I am placed before you in an unfavourable light—by calumny. Time will do me——justice." He staggered to the door, the Prince staring at him all the time like a man under the influence of a nightmare, and with some vague idea that he *must* wake soon. Just as he was about to leave the room the Colonel turned with his hand on the lock of the door, and said with great solemnity, sometimes keeping his syllables wide apart, and sometimes running them all up together, "Prince! I may have erred. But I have never—scoffed at the—holy—precepts of—my—youth. That woman—clever woman! And adorned with female charms—has no religion. *Mistrust—a woman—without—religion!* I have the honour—to say—*au revoir!*"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

It will be remembered that Uncle Joshua had announced to Chester that he had a plan for breaking off Violet's marriage with Captain Masi. It was an extremely simple plan. He intended to buy Masi off. He had small doubt that the latter would accept his proposition. "Foreigners," said Mr. Higgins to himself, "don't look at these things the same as we do." Then he began to consider in what way it would be best to open the negotiation. He thought that Masi might be somewhat shamefaced and constrained if he were required to speak with him (Uncle Joshua) on the subject face to face. And he did not wish to write the proposition, for divers good reasons. Then it struck him that he might employ as ambassador that shabby-looking individual who was so frequently in Masi's society; and of whom old Giorgi, and Chester, and others had spoken as being constantly at the office of the *Tribune of the People*. "That's my man," thought Mr. Higgins. "He looks as if he'd do a good deal for twenty francs."

The gallant Colonel had met the Higginses once in the street in company with Chester, and had given strong hints of his desire to be introduced to the family; but to these Chester had turned a deaf ear. The Colonel, however, could not be prevented from saluting the English family whenever he encountered them; and he had won golden opinions from Mrs. Higgins by the extravagant flourish with which he took off his hat to her. She thought it a very distinguished and genteel tribute; and was not at all displeased by the fact that it made all the passers-by turn to stare at her.

To the Colonel, then, Mr. Higgins resolved to address himself. And, keeping his design strictly to himself,

he wrote a short note, and sent it by the hand of a *commissionaire* to the office of the *Tribune* newspaper. He knew no other address, but he had been assured that Colonel Smith-Müller was constantly to be found at the office.

In fact, the Colonel chanced to be there when the note arrived. He was alone in the Editor's room, to which he had acquired (or assumed) the right of entry at all hours; and had been beguiling the time by opening all the unlocked drawers, examining all the papers, and reading all the letters he could lay his hand on. It was the day after his visit to the Palazzo Nasoni, and he had been anxiously debating in his mind what step to take next. He had seen that Nina did not fear him;—was prepared to defy him. She had probably destroyed his chance of making a good bargain with the Prince. His supply of money was running very low. He had had a spell of good luck at the gaming-tables of Monaco; but the proceeds of his play were almost gone. He had a long score at more than one eating-house in Rome, and it was several weeks since he had paid any rent for his squalid lodging. This latter circumstance, however, did not much oppress him, for his landlady was a lonely widow, poor and timid. She had already, in despair of getting any payment from him, hinted at her willingness to forgive part of his debt if he would but go away and leave her room free. And from that moment he had resolved not to pay anything at all. But how to provide the daily dinner and dram and tobacco was a more difficult question. What chance might there be of getting anything from Beppe Guarini? Beppe was no longer the struggling exile and conspirator of old days. He was a man of substance; and, in his way, a man of mark. He might not be so ready as Nina to brave publicity rather than come to any terms. With a woman like Nina there was always the danger of her taking the bit between her teeth. What made her so dangerous and difficult to manage was that she

would not spare herself. "I know her,—the she-devil," thought the Colonel to himself. "There's no power on earth, nor above it, nor below it, that can coax her or frighten her, if once she has made up her mind." And then he relapsed into melancholy reflections. They might, indeed, be termed tragical reflections, to judge from the expression of his brooding face. His encounter with Nina in Casa Nasoni he considered a great disaster. He had his own reasons for dreading its possible results. It was true, as she with her keen insight had said, that he feared the Guarinis. Certainly neither compassion, nor affection, nor repentance for his own share in the evils of the past had kept him from assailing them; and yet he had been many weeks in Rome and had made no sign.

He sat thinking over what had passed in the Palazzo Nasoni; wondering whether his state of intoxication had led him to say dangerous or imprudent words; trying to recall the whole scene, and cursing his ill-fortune that had brought Nina face to face with him at that moment. "As to 'face to face,'" he thought, "she might have met me face to face—has done so perhaps—and not have known me with the dark dye, and those glasses. But she had had time to watch, and listen, to hear my voice—I wish she had dropped down dead there and then!"

It was at this moment that Mr. Higgins's note was brought to him. He read it eagerly, with raised eyebrows and pursed-up mouth. In accordance with its instructions he gave the bearer a verbal answer. "Tell the gentleman it is all right. I will come punctually at the hour named." And then, when the messenger had gone away, he got up and walked up and down the room with an elated air. A hundred schemes darted into his mind. This rich Englishman might prove to be a mine of money. What could he (the Colonel) be needed for? No matter. It was clear at all events that he *was* needed. The note begged that the appointment should be considered "strictly private and

confidential." Aha! That looked promising. People who required him to be private and confidential must pay him for being so; and pay him handsomely too! He was boastful and bullying in his revived hopefulness, even as he marched about the room there alone.

In a few minutes the door opened, and Masi entered, looking tired and jaded. He nodded silently to the other man, and flung himself into a chair.

"What news, what news, my beloved friend,—my gallant Masi?" roared the Colonel.

"No news."

"Ha? How are things going? Not badly? Surely, things are not going badly?"

"As badly as possible, and that's no news. I told you there was none."

"*Coraggio!* We must not despair! We must not let that bold spirit sink into depression! The affair of the rifles has failed, certainly. That was a blow. I lay it at the door of that blockhead of an Englishman, that Chester!"

"How so? You told me you had had a telegram from Greece to say that in consequence of the change of Ministry the influential persons who were interested in the matter could do no more."

"So I did. Precisely. But it's a question of chronology, my dear friend. If I could have got that pig-headed fellow to advance the sum needed—a mere trifle—then and there, we should have been *beforehand*, don't you see? And once I had seriously compromised myself, the Greek Minister of War—I know I can trust you, my dear Masi, not to mention his name—would have at all events seen me reimbursed for time and trouble. And perhaps he would have taken the rifles at his own risk and peril. They are noble fellows, the Hellenes. And after all, you know, the money would not have come out of *his* pocket. But that confounded idiot of an Englishman lost us the chance. Well; it was not to be. I am somewhat a fatalist. I learned to be so among the Mohammedans." Then looking

once more at Masi, and seeing him still sitting in the same listless attitude, and with a gloomy face, he said boisterously, "*Allons, mon camarade!* Never despond, —never despair! I have had harder knocks than you, my dear and valued friend. But Alexis Smith-Müller defies all hazards to shake his courage." He pulled out a silver watch attached to a black ribbon. "It is nearly time for my appointment," he said with an air of importance.

"Are you going?" asked Masi, who did not even raise his eyes as he put the question.

"Yes. It is rather a mysterious thing, and may prove to be of immense importance. I have had a private summons—I don't mind telling *you*—to the Roumanian Legation. If I learn anything that can be of use to the *Tribune*—and that may be told with honour, always with honour!—you shall have it, my dear Masi. Come, cheer up! *Coraggio, coraggio, coraggio!*"

"I wish to Heaven," said Masi, speaking as if in answer to his own thoughts, and without giving much heed to what the other man had been saying, "I wish with all my soul that you had never put it into my head to mistrust Nina Guarini! I don't believe now that she meant to play me false."

"She?" burst out the Colonel with sudden ferocity. "I tell you there does not exist a falser creature in the shape of woman. She's the most treacherous, selfish, mercenary, utterly evil-minded——"

"She was a kind friend to me," interrupted Masi, still with the same air of pursuing his own meditations rather than addressing his companion. "She gave me good advice over and over again,—only I was too great a fool to take it."

"Did she, or did she not, manage the sale of the Mattoccia lands? Had she, or had she not, secret negotiations with Prince Massimiliano Nasoni? Did she tell you how matters really stood, whilst you were fancying the sale still to be made by Ciccio, and the Blacks ready to take up the scheme?"

"She was not bound to tell me,—supposing you are right in your facts. She did warn me to sell my shares. I'm sorry I wrote to her that letter. I was rash and irritated."

"You need not regret it. It is good for you to have broken with those wretches. Oh, she and that sly rascal Guarini played a double game. Friends with the Radicals, friends with the Clericals, making a speculation out of both! But they will be unmasked some day. Why she was the mistress of that pearl of Princes, that noble, elegant, honourable gentleman, the Prince Massimo Nasoni? I tell you I know it."

"What is it to us if she was?" said Masi, with a sudden frown, and turning full on the Colonel. "Why should I rake into her past? Upon my soul I do believe that if ever there was a faithful wife in the world, Nina has been a faithful wife to Guarini. She might have brought any of the men around her to her feet, by just lifting her pretty white finger. But she didn't want any love-making."

The other man looked at him with a singular expression. "Even if she had the bad taste not to want it from Captain Mario Masi, that doesn't prove——"

"Bah! I'm not a boy to make any *blague* and pretences. I might easily have fallen in love with *la* Nina. Why not? But she was my friend; honestly, simply, my friend. When I think of it all now, I believe she was the best friend I ever had."

"You didn't think so the other day."

"I didn't think at all. I was in a passion."

"You were well inspired, I can assure you. Don't repent it. You will hear some frightful revelations about that woman before long. I am grieved to say it, my dear and valued friend, but she will be shown in her true colours,—she and Guarini. There are those on their track who won't easily be turned aside. If you would have published that little article confided to me by that friend of mine——"

"Never! I will never attack Beppe or his wife with

such weapons. I have told you so once. Don't recur to that proposition, or we shall quarrel."

The Colonel slapped him on the shoulder, and then shook his hand enthusiastically. "You are a noble fellow, my dear Masi! But it pains me to see your fine nature deceived. No matter. You will be convinced some day of the truth of my words." With that he swaggered out, murmuring that he feared he should be late for his appointment with the Roumanian Secretary.

Masi, left alone, remained for some time in the same brooding attitude. At length he roused himself, and began to turn over a little packet of letters and proofs that lay ready for him on his desk. The letters were nearly all demands for money, or refusals to advance it. His creditors were pressing, and those to whom he had appealed for assistance had one and all refused it on various pretexts.

As he sat there, the printer sent in word that he wished to see him, and without waiting for permission, shouldered aside the office errand-boy, who had announced him, and pushed his way into the room. He was importunate, and somewhat rough, but at bottom not devoid of consideration for Masi. But he himself was the father of a family, he said. His children could not be fed on air. His workmen could not be paid with promises, and so on. Masi listened more quietly and patiently than was his wont. At the end of the interview he said, "To-day is Wednesday, isn't it? Things shall not go on unsettled beyond the end of this week. I have a prospect—I hope—of some assistance. If it comes, it will come before Saturday. If you will go on printing the paper until Saturday morning, I will give you my word of honour that you shall not print another line for me without the money in hand."

"But the outstanding account? It is heavy"

"If I get the assistance I hope for, you shall have half your claim down at once in ready money. If not—I shall give up everything I have in the world. When a man gives up *everything*, he can do no more."

Presently, after the printer had withdrawn, Gino Peretti bustled in with an affectation of great hurry and business. "Now, my dear Masi, what is it? I am run off my legs. I haven't a moment to spare. I wouldn't have come to any one else in Rome at this hour. But your note was so pressing—What is it?"

And when Masi began to speak of the possibility of obtaining a temporary loan for the *Tribune*, Peretti cut him short at once, with his bustling pretence of candour. It was out of the question! Out of the question! He himself was in straits for money. Didn't know which way to turn for five thousand francs. That Pontine Marshes scheme had half ruined him. Ah! People thought he had made a good thing of it, did they? He only wished they had been in his shoes! He would make them a present of his profits on that affair with a vast deal of pleasure. No, no; owing to Ciccio Nasoni's having muddled matters, and not known his own affairs as he ought to have done, the upshot was that the only person who had made a good thing of the Pontine Marshes was that illustrious scamp, Prince Massimiliano.

Again it was observable that Masi endured the oil merchant's noisy harangue with singular patience and quietude. He was not usually so tolerant of Peretti's overbearing eloquence. "Gino," said he quietly, "I wish you would tell me one thing. It's all over now, and it matters little. But I should like to know whether it was *la* Guarini who managed that transaction with the Prince."

"Yes; she and I between us. But she was the ambassadress."

"That *is* true, then?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't know it? I thought you would be sure to know it; especially as it was her doing to have those shares assigned to you."

Masi looked up quickly. "Her doing?" he said.

"Ah, well,—there, it slipped out. But I'm sure I thought you knew it by this time."

"Nina Guarini gave me those shares?"

"Oh, of course, it was the Directors who really *gave* them," answered Peretti, suddenly remembering the flourishing letter he had written on the subject in presenting them to Masi. "But *la* Nina suggested the mode—the *mode* of offering you that little tribute, as an acknowledgment of what the *Tribune* had done for the Company In fact—well, as you said, it's all over now, and it don't matter; so why not say that it was chiefly her doing?"

Peretti was a good deal relieved and surprised to find Masi in so easy and little exigent a mood. He had come prepared for reproaches, and resolved, if necessary, to tell Masi once for all that he (Gino Peretti) neither could nor would do anything more for the paper. He had got off without a scene or a quarrel, and was consequently inclined to be good-natured.

"Come now, Masi," he said, "I hope you are going to give up this newspaper affair. It will never pay a *centesimo* as a speculation; and you won't get the Party to back you with money now. There are too many irons in the fire. As a friend and a man who has some experience of these things, I *hope* you'll give it up, my dear fellow."

"I think it not unlikely that I may," answered Masi slowly. The other man looked at him in surprise. It was the first time Masi had even listened with patience to such a suggestion, much less seemed inclined to accept it.

"Bravo!" said Peretti. "Bravo! I'm glad to hear you say that. Good night."

"Good night."

"You mustn't take it ill that I don't throw good money after bad into this business."

"Oh, no. Especially as you have none to throw, and are half ruined by the Pontine Marshes Company."

Peretti laughed a little uneasily. "Ha, ha, ha! Oh well, of course, one—ahem!—one might scrape together a few thousand francs still. I don't say——. But

'here would be the use? It's all a lost affair;—a inking ship."

"And we all know what sort of creatures make haste o get out of a sinking ship."

"And what else ought any creatures to do that have grain of gumption?—crew, steersman, or skipper?"

"Well, perhaps the skipper, at all events, might—o down with it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE Colonel had very little idea what sort of person ie was likely to find in Mr. Higgins. He had been old that he was rich, and that he was a provincial nerchant. That was all he knew. Whether Mr. Higgins were likely to be more accessible to cajolery r insolence, what degree and species of lying would est go down with him, whether he were generous or tingy, hard-tempered or easy, shrewd or stupid—of all his the Colonel was quite ignorant. But he had no loubt of his own ability to get the better of the old nan; having in general a swaggering contempt for the ullibility of his fellow-creatures until they had kicked im—materially or metaphorically

Mr. Higgins had resolved to keep his negotiation vith this person strictly to himself, as has been stated. But he took no trouble to make a mystery of his oming. He had far too high an idea of his own uthority to do anything of the kind. He had simply aid to his wife, "You will be so good, Jane Higgins, s to go out of our private sitting-room this evening, nd stay out of it until I send for you. I expect a erson on private business, and I don't wish to be nterrupted."

Mrs. Higgins had not the least objection to spend he evening in the public drawing-room. In fact she

generally did so from choice. But she did not like to be turned out of what she called her own "salong." And especially she did not like to be kept in the dark on any subject. But she knew that open rebellion would be in vain. "Lor, Mr. Higgins," she cried, playfully, "what awful mysteries are going on? I hope you're not going to turn Bluebeard!"

"No, no, Jane Higgins," retorted her spouse. "I won't turn Bluebeard. I should never think of trusting you with the key."

Whereupon Mrs. Higgins flounced off. But she lingered in her bed-room, which adjoined the sitting-room, until she heard a step approaching along the corridor. And then she came forth with an innocent unconscious air, and found herself face to face with Colonel Smith-Müller. She was genuinely surprised to see him there, and at first did not imagine that he could be her husband's expected visitor. But when he had given her one of his most caricatured bows—seeing with half an eye that he was safe in exaggerating any demonstration of homage to her—he passed on to the door of the sitting-room, tapped at it, was told to enter, and went in closing the door behind him.

Mrs. Higgins walked on a little way, and then stood still hesitating for full a minute in the lighted corridor. Finally she turned, and went back very softly to her bed-room. She found her husband at the door preparing to lock it. "What do you want here, Jane Higgins?" said he. "I thought you had gone to the drawing-room."

"So I had. I only came back for my handkerchief. Why on earth do you lock the door?"

"You get your handkerchief and I'll tell you. Found it? Well then, I lock this door so as no one shall slip in and listen through the thin partition to what me and the person with me are saying."

Mrs. Higgins flushed crimson. "Goodness me, Mr. Higgins," she exclaimed. "I can't think how you can

suspect such things! How do they come into your head? *I* should never have thought of such a mean idea. I hate suspiciousness!"

But her husband had spoken in all good faith, and without the faintest thought of suspecting *her*. "Well, suspiciousness ain't a good thing, nor a pleasant thing," he answered, gravely. "And I'm glad to find you're not apt at it, Jane. Now go to the drawing-room, and leave me to my business."

"Hah!" said the Colonel, when the two men were alone. "You've fastened that door? Right, sir, right! Your precaution is a wise one."

"It was *your* precaution, to give the devil his due," answered Mr. Higgins. And then he added explanatorily, "That's a common saying in the English language, you understand, and don't mean anything personal, Colonel Smith."

"My dear sir, I quite understand. Your idiom was once familiar to me as my own."

"Was it, though? And what *is* your own? For I'm sure I don't rightly know."

"My native language is—ahem!—is Servian. But I speak also Russian, Polish, German, French, a little Turkish, a little Italian, and a little English, as you hear!"

"Lord bless me! It must be very useful to you to know so many languages."

"It has been in my time;—very useful. And you," with a superior smile; for he began to fancy this old provincial was simple, and might be overawed; "you speak no foreign tongues—no?"

"Not a word."

"Is it possible? Ha! A great disadvantage. It's lucky for you that some people take the trouble to speak your language, my good sir."

"Well, it ain't unlucky for them either. I suppose you find it worth your while to speak Russian and Prussian and Turkish, and all the rest. It suits your line of life, no doubt. You haven't learnt 'em to

oblige the Russians and the Prussians, and you don't expect the Russians and the Prussians to be grateful to you. I've seen a good deal of the world, Colonel Smith, and I look into things for myself, framing my own judgments, which are mostly correct."

The Colonel was slightly thrown out in his calculation. But he resolved to try once more if he could not quell or dazzle Mr. Higgins in another way. "Sir," said he, assuming a military attitude and inflating his chest, "when you talk to me of knowing the world, you talk to a man who has had an experience probably unmatched in Europe. I have been intimate with crowned heads, and have shared my rations with the humble conscript on the battle-field. Princes and Hospodars have been my comrades; and I know the private history of every great family on the Continent."

"Ah! Not a very respectable lot, I'm afraid," returned Mr. Higgins, shaking his head. "However, it's our duty to make allowances, and to judge 'em according to their bringing up."

Then the Colonel relinquished all hope of overwhelming this thick-skulled Briton by the brilliancy of his boastings, and said to himself that against stupidity the gods themselves fight in vain.

"No, no," pursued Mr. Higgins, perceiving an opening to introduce the topic he had at heart. "It ain't fair to judge 'em otherwise than according to their bringing up. Now, with respect to foreigners; —I always say that we must not expect foreigners to look at things the same as we do. As to marrying, now, foreigners have very different views from ourselves."

The Colonel opened his ears, and half closed his twinkling eyes, and wondered very much what was coming next. But he merely made a silent gesture of assent.

"I sent for you, Colonel Smith, to talk to you about a matter of a private nature."

"And I did not hesitate for an instant to come to you, although I will not conceal from you that I have postponed business of a rather lucrative nature to attend your summons."

"Ay, ay; we'll put all that right. I don't mean to take up your time without remunerating you for it."

The Colonel thought this sounded promising, and brightened up immediately. "My dear, my revered sir," he said; "I am a poor man,—a poor soldier. Why should I be ashamed to own it? In the words of the great Napoleon I may say, '*Tout est perdu fors l'honneur;*' all is lost save honour,—save honour."

"Did *he* say that?"

"Certainly. It was—if my memory serves me—immediately after the celebrated Battle of Waterloo."

"Then it was as big a lie as ever he told in his life. However, we'll stick to our business, and never mind Bonyparty. You're a great friend, I am told, of Captain Marsy?"

The Colonel declared himself to be Masi's dearest and most intimate friend. He had advised Masi on many points of importance; had guided him by the light of his experience. If Masi would always have listened to him, things would have gone better with Masi.

"Then, since you're so deep in his confidence," said Mr. Higgins, "no doubt you've heard talk of his marrying a young lady—my great niece, in fact."

The Colonel had not heard a word of it until that moment; but he did not choose to confess so. And in order not to compromise himself, he put on a mysterious look, and nodded slowly and emphatically several times without speaking. Then Mr. Higgins in a few plain words told him that the young lady's family disapproved of the marriage, and that she would not have a penny if she married against her uncle's will; moreover, that Captain Masi had been told as much, and nevertheless seemed inclined to persist.

"I'm astonished!" said the Colonel. As indeed he

was. "And the lady's sentiments?" he inquired, after a short pause, with a cunning look.

"We need not discuss the lady's sentiments. The lady considers herself bound by her promise, that's all we need consider. Now I want Captain Marsy to give her her promise back."

"Aha!" The Colonel began to scent a paying job for himself out of this business. "But how could we demand such a sacrifice from our dear Masi? I put it to you, my most honoured sir—how could we? Especially as he, perhaps, hopes that you—with your noble and affectionate nature—would be melted by the voice of True Love, to the extent of a modest *dot* —a marriage portion—humph?"

"You've travelled a good deal, Colonel Smith," returned Mr. Higgins, slowly, "but I dare say you've never been in Dozebury If you knew Dozebury folks, you'd understand that when Joshua Higgins says a thing he means it." The way in which the tight straight lips closed after this speech was more convincing than the words themselves.

"Then," said the Colonel, rubbing his hands over his scrub of cropped grey hair, "I don't quite see a way out of this sad—this truly affecting position."

"The way out of it that I have thought of, is this," answered Mr. Higgins. "Captain Marsy is in want of money. His business affairs are in a bad way, and if he marries a young woman without a farthing, that won't mend them. I'm willing to advance Captain Marsy a sum of money down in hard cash, if he will give me an undertaking in writing to relinquish all claim to marry my niece."

The Colonel stared at him eagerly. "And have you mentioned this to Masi?" he asked.

"No, I have not. I sent for you with the idea of getting you to mention it to him. I thought he might feel a little awkward in talking it over with me; and that it would be best to employ a third party who had no personal feeling in the matter."

The Colonel got up, seized Mr. Higgins's hands, shook them enthusiastically, and began to walk about the room in an excited way. "The thought does you honour, my dear sir! It is a thought of striking delicacy worthy of your exalted character. And if there is a man on earth who can carry the thing through, it is I. I have a hold on Masi. He trusts me, he respects me. But it will not be an easy task even for me. There will be frightful wear and tear of the nervous system, my very dear and venerated sir!"

"You'll be doing a good work for your friend if you can persuade him. It will be far the best arrangement for his interests."

"That thought will chiefly sustain me in the arduous task;—that is to say, if I am able to undertake it. My pecuniary circumstances render a prolonged stay in Rome very difficult for me at this moment. In fact, when your note reached me I had made all my arrangements for starting for Bosnia the day after to-morrow. I have a rather pressing affair there."

Mr. Higgins thought this difficulty could be got over. And then they came to the terms of the bargain. Colonel Smith-Müller's pretensions were at first very extravagant. But after some haggling he brought them down to a sum which Mr. Higgins consented to give. "If I were a rich grocer, instead of a poor devil of a soldier who has fought and bled on the field," said he, a little ruffled by Mr. Higgins's unexpected toughness at a bargain, "I would not receive a *centime* in such a cause. There are services that cannot be paid for. But expenses out of pocket—prolonged sojourn in Rome, loss of money owing to my absence from Bosnia—*these*, my honest poverty compel me to accept."

"Well, you do your best, and you'll be paid fair and full," said Mr. Higgins, perfectly unmoved by this flourish.

"We must proceed cautiously," returned the other.

"Masi is as proud as Lucifer. I shall go heart and soul into your mission, believe me. And I'm perhaps the only man existing, who is capable of carrying it through!"

Nevertheless, as he walked away from the boarding-house the Colonel did not clearly see his way to success. Of course a man who understood his own interests would jump at the offer. But Masi was utterly wrong-headed on so many points. The idea of his wanting to marry a penniless girl was in itself, under all the circumstances, sheer stark madness! And the sudden swinging back to his infatuation for the Guarinis was the most idiotic, romantic folly! No; the task would not be easy. But in one way or another the Colonel believed he should be able to gain a good deal of money for himself out of it. "And once I have a thousand francs in hand," thought he, "I'll be off. I won't stay here. The atmosphere is getting unwholesome. It isn't worth while to run any risks for the chance of screwing anything out of that white-faced dog, Ciccio Nasoni, or from the pious Don Giovanni, his father. If that accursed woman hadn't recognized me, I might still have had a good game to play here, but as it is——what's that?" He stopped with a great start. A man had brushed past him suddenly He must have come out of a doorway, for no footsteps had been audible. "Ha! By ——!" muttered the Colonel, as he wiped his face, on which the perspiration had started out, "my nerve isn't what it used to be."

The man, evidently a stranger, went along the street before him, looking up at the numbers on the doorways by the dim light. He failed, apparently, to find the house he wanted. Perhaps he had mistaken the street; for presently he turned back and faced the Colonel, looking at him for a moment as they passed each other under a street lamp. "I beg your pardon," he said, stopping, and speaking in Italian, with the accent of one of the northern provinces, "could you

direct me to the Via delle Botteghe Oscure? I'm a stranger, and have missed my way."

The Colonel directed him in a few words, and the other man, slightly touching his hat, went on his way.

"Ha!" said the Colonel to himself, "I don't know you. Never saw you in my life before!" He had an extraordinary accurate and retentive memory for faces, which had often stood him in good stead. "No, no; I don't know you. But my nerve has gone to the devil. That start made me shake like an old crone with the palsy." And he growled and swore savagely under his breath. And before he proceeded far on his way, he stopped at a liquor shop and swallowed a dram. As he raised the glass to his lips his hand shook. And again he muttered a curse. "I must get out of this place, *coûte qui coûte*, or the black terror will get hold of me as it did in Varna. I'll settle this business of the old fool of an Englishman, and be off. My nerve—my nerve is gone to the devil!"

CHAPTER XXXV

NINA GUARINI had told Beppe the same day all that had passed at the Palazzo Nasoni. The telling of the tale had cost her many pangs. Every word was like a rough touch upon a half-closed wound. And yet she felt herself drawn nearer to Beppe by all the memories of the stormy past that were evoked as they spoke together. She thought of his faithful goodness to her in those dreadful days. And as she thought, there came back to her the old feeling of horror which used to overwhelm her in Paris at Laszinski's approach; and she shuddered from head to foot, and pressed closer to Beppe like a frightened child

"You are feeling the reaction," said Beppe, gently. "You were brave enough to his face, Nina."

"Brave? I don't know. I was furious. I certainly had no fear of him in hot blood."

"You need have no fear of him at any time. He cannot hurt us."

"His very existence hurts me. I feel as if I knew that a wild beast had got loose from his cage, and I might come on him at any moment. And yet nothing is more sure than that he had some fear of me. Half drunk as he was, he winced every time I mentioned his real name."

"A man who is so well acquainted with the inside of the prison and the *bagne* may have good reasons for that," answered Beppe, carelessly; but he looked thoughtful.

"And why did he conceal his existence from us for so long? Even as it was, he did not wish to be recognized. He spoke of Laszinski as being alive, but far away,—in Croatia."

"Who knows why? Who knows?" said Guarini, abstractedly. But the shadow on his face grew very deep, and he remained silent for a long time, pondering intently.

"Listen, Nina," he said at length. "It is clear that this wild beast's claws are pared, or he would have attacked us long ago, and made all Rome ring with his story. No one knows it here, except you and me."

"And Max."

"Prince Massimo will hold his tongue for divers good reasons."

"That wretch has spoken evil of me to Masi, and——"

"What of that? If Masi is capable of being moved against his best friend by the words of such a one as——"

"It is not Masi's opinion that troubles me. I am sorry if he thinks ill of me; but it does not go deep.

But I am grieved, Beppe, grieved to the heart about Violet. You don't know—I have never been able to speak of it—but I first took an affection for this English girl because she reminded me of my Marie."

Beppe gently stroked the rich black tresses of her bowed head.

"And I had a sort of superstitious fancy that I was doing something for Marie's memory—she who was so sweet and helpful to every one!—by being kind to the girl. And then she twined herself round my heart, and I came to love her for her own sake. And I was sorry for her, and that made me love her more. I, who have no sister, no daughter, no woman friend, I felt it sweet to have the affection of this innocent girl."

Again Beppe lightly stroked her hair in silence. Nina was so little apt to speak of her own feelings that this womanly strain of tenderness in her moved him with a sort of surprise. He thought it a weakness; but he loved her the better for it.

At the bottom of his heart he was more disquieted by this astonishing resuscitation of Laszinski than he had cared to show Nina. He had had none of the haunting doubts as to the man's death which had troubled her; and the shock of this discovery was proportionately great. And then, although he had declared that Laszinski could not hurt them, or he would already have done so, yet the fact that Laszinski was living, and walking about in the same city with himself, made the world different for Beppe Guarini. Let him be as great a villain as he might, Casimir Laszinski was Nina's husband by a tie which neither the laws of Austria nor Italy could break. All the rest of the day Beppe was taciturn and thoughtful. He gave a little nervous glance at the door every time it was opened, and looked mistrustfully and anxiously at each of the numerous letters which he received in the course of his business. He had a long colloquy with Jules Bonnet, who was in Rome on a brief visit, the scope of which was connected with the political

propaganda of Socialistic doctrines. Once Nina, going suddenly into the study where the two men were talking together, heard Jules Bonnet say, "He was marked as a traitor years ago; and if the Russians in Geneva were once sure——" But seeing her, he broke off and changed his discourse.

Nina, for her part, was anxious for some news of Violet. And knowing how absolute was the "Yea, yea," and "Nay, nay," of the "little Puritan" as she called her, and that she would never consent to deceive Mario by holding any secret communication with her friend, Nina bethought her of sending for Kitty Low.

Kitty's account of her young mistress was sad enough. "She cries all day when she's by herself, or with me alone. And she only makes a little pretence of cheering up for her aunt's sake, or when Mr. Chester comes in. Ah, he's a very fine sort of a young man, is Mr. Chester. I wish she could have chosen him instead of that Captain!"

"Poor Captain!"

"Oh, he's fond of her in his way, Signora. But it's but a poor kind of way when all's said and done. I never was in love myself, and it ain't very likely as any one will ever be in love with me. So perhaps, you'll say I've no right to speak. But I do think there's a deal of false boasting goes on about 'love' after the Captain's fashion. A sweet pretty young creature takes his fancy, and he wants to have her for his own. And his vanity is tickled—and well it may!—by her being devoted to him. And the world is to leave off minding its own business to take an interest in him, and say what a fine thing it all is! What is it but selfishness? *I* can't see as it's anything else. For, remember, he's not to be expected to make any sacrifices, nor hear any reason, nor put his pride in his pocket, nor listen to any advice as goes against the grain! Oh, no!"

"Men don't love as we do, Kitty."

"Oh, I don't say it's only the men. There's plenty of

selfishness among women. But all men ain't the same. There's differences, thanks be! Now Mr. Chester is different."

"And do you think that Mr. Chester loves Violet?"

"Yes, I do;—what *I* call loving. He puts hisself on one side, does Mr. Chester, and understands that there's something due to other folks, and that Number One, though it may be a very interesting number, don't *quite* fill up the whole of the heavens and the earth!"

"You are hard on the Captain, Kitty."

"Am I, Signora?" Then after a pause of reflection, "Well, perhaps I am. It ain't fair to expect grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles. And it ain't altogether his fault, if poor Miss Violet has dressed him out in her fancy with all sorts of fine feathers that don't belong to him."

"Ah! She's not the first woman who has done that, my good Kitty."

"Why, no; more's the pity! After all, I suppose the Lord has ordained it so, and we must have faith that it's for the best. And to be sure if men and women saw each other as they really are, there'd be a sight fewer marriages. I doubt we should have no need for the emigration societies."

Then Nina asked if Violet spoke of her, and was answered that she did, and always with affection. "It's very hard on her," said Kitty Low, "this freak the Captain has took to quarrel with you, Signora. And, perhaps, Miss Violet might have stood out against it if things had been going well with him; for she has spirit enough sometimes. But she says she won't add to his vexations just at this time. She'll wait with patience, and all that. Ah, dear me, when a man gets a woman to pity him, he has a tight hold on her! And it always seems to me one of the curiousest things in this curious world that women, who certainly don't have the best of it here below, are so ready to be sorry for them great, strong,

masterful creatures directly the least little thing goes crooked with 'em. There's a mother's heart in most women, and a touch of the baby in most men; and may be *that's* the reason."

Nina dismissed Kitty Low with a great nosegay of rare flowers for Violet. "You need not say who it comes from," she said. "Just set them in a vase on her table. She loves flowers."

"No need to say a word, Signora! She'll know well enough whose kind thought it was to send them,—poor dear."

The next morning Nina ordered the *coupé* and drove straight to the office of the *Tribune*, taking Pippo with her on the box. Arrived there, she sent up a pencilled word on a card: "If you are alone, I request you to see me." And in a few moments Pippo came back begging her to go upstairs.

She had scarcely entered the inner room when Masi, starting up, advanced to her with both hands held out. "Ah, Signora Nina, Signora Nina," he said, "there's no one like you in the world! I always said so, even when I did not know it so well as I do now."

Her quick eye noticed his haggard look; her quick ear observed the subdued tone of his voice, that had lost its old resonant *timbre*, and sounded like the voice of a person very weary. Any little lingering resentment or thought of reproaching him, was quenched in her breast. "Well, Masi, what has all this been about?" she said as cheerfully as she could. "I see I am forgiven at any rate."

"It is for me to beg forgiveness. I——"

"No, no, no; let it be! Don't let us waste our time with that sort of thing."

"I only learnt yesterday that those shares which were assigned to me——"

She stopped him. "Now, Masi, look here. Let us make a bargain. I have something to forgive. You made a mistake. Well, I'll forgive you on con-

dition that you say not a word more, now or hereafter, about those wretched shares."

"But, Signora Nina, you cannot be allowed to crush people under such a weight of obligation without their uttering a word!"

"Nonsense about obligations! If you will hear the truth I did the little I could do, less for your sake than for Violet's; and less for her than for the sake of—some one whom you neither of you ever saw or heard of. So that is finished and done with. And now, tell me, when may I see Violet?"

"See Violet? Whenever you please, I suppose! Why do you ask me?"

"What! Have you forgotten that you laid your imperial commands on her to hold no communication with me?"

"I? Who says so?"

"She herself! She wrote me a little despairing note on the subject, all blotted with tears."

"No! Truly! Oh the silly child! I suppose I said something in a passion. I scarcely remember it, even."

"She remembered it. But have you not spoken to her on the subject since?"

"I have scarcely seen her since. Only once, for a few minutes. I have been so busy."

"*Poveretta!*"

"Yes, yes; *poveretta*, as much as you like, but I ask you, *Signora Nina mia*, if such holding one to the letter of every idle word is not childish,—and even wearisome?"

"H'm! Perhaps in time she may learn not to believe you."

"Violet has such overstrained notions. A kind of scrupulosity that hasn't common sense in it. Sometimes we don't seem to understand each other at all."

"*Sometimes!*" thought Nina. "No; you seldom understand one another." But she kept the thought to herself. Here was this poor girl, in her single

minded sincerity, sacrificing her own wishes to obey an idle word, spoken in anger, and already forgotten by the speaker. And here was Mario resenting her obedience as something overstrained,—almost affected. But what could be said? Any word from a third person would be certainly useless, and probably harmful.

Nina changed the subject, and began to warn Masi against the man who called himself Smith-Müller; telling him that she knew the man to be false and unscrupulous, and altogether evil.

"Oh," answered Masi carelessly, "he can do me no harm. I trust him no farther than I can see him. He is useful to me in a way. He picks up all sorts of information by some means or other. And with all his *blague* he's not a bad sort of fellow, poor devil. It's quite singular what a strong attachment he has to *me*."

"Masi, Masi, he has no more power of being sincerely attached to any one than Mephistopheles who clenches his cold devil's fist in the face of creation!"

Masi stared at her. He was not accustomed to hear anything so rhetorical and emphatic from her lips. A few weeks ago he would have been curious to discover the cause of her unusual emotion. But now a strange listlessness had come over him. His interest, his very faculties, seemed absorbed in the one subject of the newspaper. When Nina spoke of that, he listened and answered with something of his old vivacity. He showed her a series of articles in the *Messenger of Peace*—violent personal attacks on himself, thinly disguised. He was accused of dishonourable intrigues; of political dishonesty; of cynical disregard for his obligations towards his creditors.

"That's my dear friend Ciccio's doing," said he. "He has never forgiven the part the *Tribune* took in the affair of the Pontine Marshes. He was hit in a tender place—his pocket."

Nina tossed aside the papers with a scornful gesture. "Surely you do not let attacks like that trouble you?" she said. But it was clear that they did trouble him.

His *amour propre* was still sensitive. Then, despite her rebuff on a former occasion, Nina set herself to persuade him to abandon journalism altogether. She tried scolding him in her old playful way; she tried coaxing; she tried hard, plain speaking; pointing out the futility of his struggle, and how manifestly it was his duty to the woman he had bound himself to marry, to accept his defeat, and make a new effort in some other direction. He listened in absolute silence, with the same quiet gentleness,—almost apathy,—which had struck Peretti. All at once Nina said, fixing her brilliant dark eyes on his, "Masi, what is your plan? I see you have one. You have made up your mind to do something in spite of us all! What is it?"

He laughed softly. "*Viva la Signora Nina!*" he said. "Of all the men I have talked with, not one of them has seen that. Yes; Nina *carissima;* you are right. I have a plan, and I mean to carry it out."

"May one know it?" she asked with a smile. But the delicately gloved hand she laid on his sleeve had turned cold, and her voice was not steady.

"To-day,—let me see!—to-day is Thursday. You shall know on Saturday. It is not long to wait till Saturday."

"And you can't trust me,—not even me, with it before then?"

"I'm afraid not. No; I cannot tell you my plan now. But you shall know it on Saturday."

"Masi, will you lunch with me on Saturday?"

"No, *cara*. Not on Saturday. I cannot."

"Will you dine with me, then?"

"At what hour?"

"Half-past seven, as usual. I shall probably be alone. If you like, I will ask Violet."

"No, don't ask Violet."

"As you please. Will you come?"

"Well,—if my combination succeeds,—yes. But don't wait for me."

"But I *shall* wait for you! I allow no such loophole for leaving me in the lurch. If you are not punctual, my dinner will be spoiled, and my cook will be raving. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear," he answered, with one of his old winning, frank smiles.

"I'm so glad we're friends, again, Masi!"

"Friends! When were we anything else? No, no, no; don't shake your head! I say I never was anything but your friend in my heart; and you know it in *your* heart,—not being a silly little Puritan, but a flesh-and-blood woman who knows the world and can make allowances!"

"Ah, *vaurien!* She is too good for you!"

"I don't say no. But people who are too good are very inconvenient!"

She looked at him reassured. There was a gleam of his old self in his words and his smile.

"You won't forget Saturday then?"

"No. I won't forget Saturday."

She held out her hand, which he pressed with a strong grip that hurt her. Then lightly holding her shoulders with his two hands, he bent down and kissed her forehead. "Good-bye, Nina," he said. "God bless you."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"And he 'did not mean it,' you say! But what then, did he mean? What are words worth? Have they any value for him at all?"

Violet sat in the shabby sitting-room in her aunt's lodging, holding Nina's hand.

"Perhaps he did mean it, *then.* He was under a mistake. He was hot and angry. You see, *mon enfant,* these dear Southerns often think what they

speak, instead of speaking what they think. The two things are different."

The tears stood in Violet's eyes. She thought of Nina's words, "You will expect from him what he cannot give, and what he will think you foolish for expecting."

Slowly, slowly, by painful degrees, resisted and fought against step by step, but ever victoriously advancing—helped by the candour and rectitude of her nature—the conviction had for some time past been growing up in her mind that she had been blind and rash and wilful, and that her love had been a delusive dream. It was not that she said to herself "Mario will never make me happy;" but that she felt in her innermost heart that she could never, never be to *him* all that she had fondly hoped. Was she necessary to Mario's happiness? Was his life incomplete and lonely without her? Was not the larger part of it occupied with interests in which he did not expect or even wish her to share? Only a few days previously she had expressed her bitter regret that he had entered into the newspaper speculation for her sake; and he had answered, "*Che, che!* Don't take it into your head that you are responsible for that. I should have gone into something of the kind, sooner or later, if there had been no Violet Moore in the world!"

But even in her inmost thoughts she made gentle and generous allowances for him. Kitty Low had not spoken without reason when she said that if a man could induce a woman to pity him, he had a tight hold on her.

As Nina drove up to her own door after leaving Violet, she met William Chester coming away from it; and she made him return and enter the house with her. She told him of her interview with Masi, and how she had just left Violet, and that they were all good friends again. "Dear Violet, you know, interpreted his words too much *au pied de la lettre*."

Chester looked grave. "How else should one interpret a man's words, on so serious a subject as breaking with an old friend?" he said.

"Oh, yes, yes; I know all that!" answered Nina, a little impatiently. "With you, no doubt, it would be different. But Masi is of another temperament. One must take people as they are." Her intelligence and her conscience approved Chester. But there was more sympathy in her heart for Masi. And that sympathy was quickened and intensified now by the haunting fear of some impending disaster.

"I came to bid you farewell, Signora," said Chester, when they were seated in the study.

"Farewell!"

"Yes; I am going away from Rome. I have already lingered here longer than I at first intended."

"Going away! Oh, I am sorry! I am sorry for Violet."

Chester smiled half sadly, half bitterly. "I do not think there is any need for you to be sorry on her account," he said.

Nina felt that she had no right to say more, or to thrust herself into his confidence, and he was evidently not to be moved out of his reserve by any sudden wave of emotion. After a short silence she said, "When do you go, Mr. Chester?"

"To-morrow. Or, possibly, if all my preparations are not completed, on Saturday morning."

"Oh, don't go so soon! Stay a day longer! Stay beyond Saturday!" she said, clasping her hands nervously.

"For what reason? To what end? I—I—perhaps I ought not to intrude my personal feelings on you, but I assure you there are reasons which make my stay in Rome very painful."

"I know them! I guess them. But pray do not go away so soon! If it is a sacrifice—I ask you to make it for Violet's sake!"

"My dear Signora, you are under some strange

misapprehension. My staying here can be of no use or comfort to Violet just now. I have spoken with her about it. We are agreed. It sounds like an empty boast to say that if I could serve her by staying, I would stay. But I think she knows that it is so."

"Would it be so great an effort for you to put off your journey four-and-twenty hours?"

"No;—if there were any rational motive for it."

"Will you act, for once, on an irrational motive? Will you stay to oblige me?" She smiled at him, and looked up half playfully. But under the gracefulness and ease of her manner there was a strange agitation, which made her lips quiver, and her hands press the brilliants on her fingers until they made red marks on the white skin.

"Oh, of course, if you really make a point of it! Why should I refuse? I am only too happy to accede to your request, only I must tell you frankly once more, if you think it will be of the least service to Violet, you are mistaken."

"No, no, not to Violet, to *me!* A quite irrational favour to me!"

He smiled in spite of himself. "You have been so kind and friendly and hospitable to us all, Signora, that it would be strange to refuse so small a request. And I am sure you have a reason that seems to you sufficient for making it."

"Thank you," she said, earnestly. "Thank you with all my heart!"

And Chester went away musing curiously on her insistence, and half ashamed of himself for having yielded to it without any convincing grounds.

That evening, when her *salon* was filled as usual by a crowd of men, Nina gathered round her a little knot of intimates, and spoke to them of Masi. Dr. Angeloni opined that there was no chance of anything being effected by the Party for the assistance of the *Tribune of the People*. Silvotti was inclined to differ from him, and thought there were still hopes of a

"combination." Giorgi, embittered more than ever by the failure of the Pontine Marshes Company, and the consequent overthrow of his hopes in connection with it, declared that the only way to succeed or make your way nowadays was to pay court to the Clericals and the reactionary party; and that it was sufficient for a man to be suspected of liberal and patriotic principles for him to be systematically neglected, if not actively persecuted.

"I wish you'd look after Masi a little during the next few days," said Nina. "I think we have all left him too much to himself. He gets morbid and dispirited."

"Dispirited!" echoed Carlo Silvotti, with a laugh. "That's not a word that belongs to Masi at all. He throws off troubles like water from a duck's back. He *won't* suffer, not he!"

"That's just what I'm afraid of," murmured Nina. And then she took Dr. Angeloni's arm, and walked aside with him, talking in a low and earnest voice.

Meanwhile the object of her solicitude was tranquilly eating his dinner at the *Café di Roma*, in company with Telemaco Bini, the fat Deputy with the small feet, whom we have seen at the Guarinis, and an ex-Secretary of the Ministry of Grace and Justice. They were extremely cheerful, despite their holding most gloomy views respecting the internal and external policy of Italy, and uttering terrible prognostications of the impending ruin of their country. But this prospect has seldom been found to impair the appetite of professional politicians.

When they separated Masi asked Bini to walk down with him to the office. Bini had been an occasional *collaborateur* on the *Tribune* ever since its first establishment. As the two men strolled along the lighted streets, side by side, their talk was of renewing bills, of raising loans—of money, in a word, and nothing but money. A dishonoured bill of exchange did not appear to Telemaco Bini by any means so terrible a possibility as Masi seemed to think it. "*Per Bacco.* When one

has done all one can, I don't see——! *I* had several bills protested after I had gone into that silk-growing affair in Lombardy."

"If you see your way to paying up eventually it may be different," admitted Masi.

The other man thoughtfully rubbed his nose. "Well," said he, "I have not quite seen my way to that, yet!"

As they entered the narrow dingy street where the newspaper office was situated, they saw a man slowly pacing along before them, who, when he came opposite to the door of the office, being on the other side of the street, stopped and glanced upward at the windows, and then all along the pavement on each side of the way. In so doing he became aware of them, and, after looking at them carelessly for a moment, strolled on again at the same slow pace, and disappeared round the corner of the next turning.

"Our friend has chosen an odd place for a promenade," observed Bini.

"I noticed him here this morning. I suppose he's commissioned by some creditor to see that I don't carry off any of the valuable deal tables and rickety chairs which compose the choice furniture of the office," returned Masi with a laugh.

When they went upstairs, Bini sat down to sketch out an article, the purport of which had been agreed upon among them at dinner; the ex-Secretary having furnished some damaging details as to the administration of his successor, and the fat Deputy having favoured them with the contents of a private letter from an extraordinarily well-informed personage in Paris, which, if published, would infallibly shake the position of his Excellency the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs. Masi turned over a packet of correspondence arrived by that evening's post. "Ah!" he exclaimed, after reading one special letter, "the man charged with that affair has obtained the promise of an interview from the person I told you of."

Bini raised his tragic eyebrows. "M——?" said he mysteriously.

"Yes; and the Director of the Bank does not seem unfavourably disposed."

"Bravo! Things are going well then?"

"Who can say? *Sarà quel che sarà!*" returned Masi with a slight shrug.

Then for a while there was nothing heard but the scratching of Bini's rapid pen and the rustling of paper. But before very long the silence was broken by louder sounds. A heavy foot came stamping up the stairs, and Colonel Smith-Müller burst into the room with his hat in one hand and a pocket-handkerchief in the other, with which he was wiping his face. "My dear Masi," he shouted, "I am exhausted,—exhausted. I have been rushing about on business, and not my own business either, all day. Ah, Bini *carissimo!* I want to speak to you by and by, my dear Masi."

Bini looked up with his serious stare. "Good evening, Colonel," he said. "I shall have finished directly. That is to say,—the article isn't quite done, Masi; but it's too late for to-morrow's paper now, at all events. I'll correct it, and put it into shape for Saturday. Meanwhile, if you and the Colonel have any private business——"

"No, nonsense; we have no secrets to talk of," answered Masi. But the Colonel made a grimace behind Bini's back, and signed to Masi to get rid of him. And then he began to walk up and down the room with ostentatious impatience. Bini, for his part, was never sorry to break off from work. He looked rather longingly at the inkstand and the abundant provision of writing paper, and muttered something about having one or two letters which he should have liked to get written then and there. But finally he rose from his chair, and went away Then the Colonel began to exhibit still more marked symptoms of excitement and agitation. He puffed, and panted, and swore, and walked about, and sat down, and started up again, and mopped his face; and at length sent the errand-boy to

a neighbouring liquor-shop to get him some of the concoction sold there under the name of *rhum*. Having had his dram, he braced himself to broach Mr. Higgins's proposition to Masi; watching the latter anxiously all the time, and ready to change his tone at the least hint to be gathered from his friend's countenance.

For some time Masi did not fully comprehend the proposal; the Colonel not thinking it prudent to blurt it out without preparation. "But what is it, then?" said Masi at length. "Does the old man coolly offer to pay me for giving up his niece? Is it *that?*"

His manner was so much more placid than the Colonel had expected, that the latter began to bluster. "Ha! I have sacrificed myself for my friend, according to my old foolish way. A pleasant task you may imagine it to be, to listen to that block-headed *épicier*, to waste my hours,—which are counted in Rome now,—to plead a losing cause! But no matter. Alexis Smith-Müller expects no gratitude. He is used to that."

"Did old Higgins commission you to make me that offer?"

"Old Higgins! Who is old Higgins? After all, who and what is old Higgins? A vulgar English shopkeeper! They are all shopkeepers at heart. And why should we be sensitive to *his* opinions? *Parbleu!* If he offers a handsome sum,—a sum which would float us for another quarter of a year,—why pay him the compliment of behaving with extreme delicacy? Delicacy is wasted on a fellow like that. He cannot understand it. He cannot rise to it. The sentiments of a chivalrous gentleman are unknown to old Higgins! Then why not get from him what he has to give, instead of expecting from him what he has not? Honour and a sense of delicacy?—*Point!* He has them not. Pounds sterling?—plenty! Let us take his pounds sterling! They are the only arguments he understands. Let us accept them! It has ever been my rule to converse with the natives of

a country in their own language, and according to their own customs. With a King of the Gold Coast, your negotiations are carried on in beads and *rhum;*—with an Englishman in pounds sterling. We are not children, *quoi!* We are men of the world, eh?"

He had begun his speech with a vapouring burst of indignation; as he carried it on, he had gradually cooled down into a semblance of putting the argument fairly; he had finished it by undisguisedly recommending Masi to take Mr. Higgins's bribe. And every word, every gesture, every inflection of his voice had carefully followed the indications which he was able to gather from watching Masi's face.

Masi remained singularly quiet. There was no fire of wrath in his countenance. No volcanic explosion appeared to be imminent. The Colonel, in undertaking this mission, had not concealed from himself that one—and by no means the remotest—possibility connected with it, was that Masi should fly into a violent rage, and kick him downstairs. But no; Masi remained passive, and listened without any outward symptoms of irritation. The Colonel was emboldened to hope for ultimate success. He would have mentally reviled Masi for a fool if he had peremptorily rejected the proposition. But none the less did he mentally sneer and jeer at him for appearing to consider it. "Aha! Hunger tames tigers; and want of cash brings down bold Captains to a condition of wonderful meekness," thought he. "The way I've heard that fellow talk about honour and independence! Bah! A *blagueur*, like the rest!"

"Well, I think, Colonel," said Masi at length rather slowly, "I think I shall be able to oblige the good Uncle Higgins."

The Colonel became rampant in his triumph. He slapped his breast, he marched about, he tossed off the last remaining drops of rum. "Oblige him, my dear Masi? Bleed him! Let us see the colour of his pounds sterling. Ha, ha, ha! You shall make a

fine bargain. *I* will arrange it for you,—I am an old negotiator, a wary fox, experienced in the secret service of my country! We are *vieilles moustaches Quoi!* We know how to make a treaty with the barbarous tribes. *Sacr-rre!*"

"Yes; I think I shall be able to oblige the old Uncle Higgins. But I don't mean him to pay me for it."

The Colonel stopped short in his triumphal march, and turned sharp round, staring at Masi as though some amazing phenomenon had struck him dumb. "What?" he gasped at length. "You are joking —Masi! What do you mean?—*Mauvaise plaisanterie!* Ha! I swear you quite took me in, for a moment!" And the Colonel wiped his forehead, and glared at the other man with an expression half savage, half alarmed.

"Do you know, my friend," said Masi deliberately, "that you have had a very narrow escape?"

"Escape! Ha? What?" blustered the Colonel, "*Point de farces!* No more bad jokes, my beloved Masi! I am an old soldier and a man of honour."

"You have had an extraordinary narrow escape of having that cane of yours broken over your shoulders!"

The Colonel leaped backwards, and seized his cane, which was heavily loaded. He drew himself up to his full height, and confronted Masi. He was a tall powerful man; and though broken by dissipation, would still be no contemptible antagonist in a brief struggle. Masi sat like a rock, leaning with one elbow on the table, and looking at him steadily with his bright, handsome Southern eyes, as a man might look at a dangerous dog. And as he looked, all Nina's warnings against the fellow recurred to his mind. It seemed to him as if a mask had fallen from the Servian's face, and he saw the evil soul glaring at him for the first time from those narrow cunning loopholes.

The position did not really last more than three seconds; but it seemed a much longer time to both the men. Smith-Müller at length moved, and the impression on Masi's mind was effaced, like reflections in water dispersed by a ripple. The Colonel lowered his arm that held the cane. If the negotiation with the old Englishman failed, he had small chance of getting wherewithal to leave Rome; and he was possessed with a longing to leave it. A nameless terror urged him to fly and hide himself. The thought that the existence of Casimir Laszinski was known to more than one person in the city filled him with tremors. He would make one last desperate effort to obtain some money from Mr. Higgins; and to that end it was necessary to be prompt. Masi must not see the old man first. He dropped his cane, as has been said; drew out his pocket-handkerchief, which he passed ostentatiously across his eyes, slapped his breast two or three times, and said in a broken voice: "I have endured much. Ingratitude is familiar to me. But insult I have never brooked until to-day. Friendship weakens a man. It has weakened me. It has made me contemptible in my own eyes. Had any other being in Rome spoken those words to me, his blood would have flowed like water. But you, Mario Masi, have presumed upon the affection of a comrade,—an old soldier,—and a man of honour. Enough. I shall be at my lodgings all to-morrow, and if you need me you know where to find me."

And with that he went away.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

In compliance with the Signora Nina's request the three men with whom she had spoken agreed to keep a watch on Masi, and distract his mind, if possible, from brooding on gloomy thoughts. Silvotti did not much

believe in the necessity of any such distraction. Who had ever seen Mario Masi out of spirits? It was his creed to dismiss unpleasant considerations from his mind, and he acted on it.

In fact when they made an excuse connected with the business of the newspaper to call on him the following day (Friday) at the office, Masi certainly showed no symptoms of melancholy. It had become known to the more intimate circle of those who frequented Casa Guarini that Masi was betrothed to the pretty English girl whom they all liked. And it was generally imagined that she would have a good dowry. Not that this had ever been stated—or even hinted—by any one likely to be well informed; but she was known to have a rich uncle. And, besides, money was considered to be almost as inevitable an appurtenance to English people as their accent. Bini and one or two of the set thought there was no fear of Masi falling into despondency with the prospect of a good marriage to help him out; but others remarked that Masi had a peculiarly sensitive pride and independence in money matters, and that if he could bring nothing in the shape of an equivalent for the bride's fortune to the common stock, the projected marriage might evaporate into air altogether.

Dr. Angeloni was peculiarly beloved and respected by his own party, and considerably feared and respected by his political adversaries. He was a man who could take it on himself to cross-examine Masi as to the prospects of the *Tribune*, without fear of being deemed impertinently meddlesome. Masi answered him quite frankly up to a certain point. Then at length he said lightly, "Who knows how things will go? There is one chance,—a combination, which I am now negotiating, and which may succeed. If that fails——"

"You will suspend the publication of the journal?"

"*Suspend* it? Well, yes; if you like to put it so,—as one may call death a suspension of breathing!" And Masi laughed as he said it.

The four men (Giorgi and Silvotti being of the party) sat smoking and chatting in the dingy office which was the editor's private sanctum. The outer office was larger. The two rooms did not communicate with each other directly, but were separated by a landing of the common staircase. The party talked of all sorts of subjects, except the *Tribune of the People*. After the few words exchanged between Dr. Angeloni and Masi, the newspaper was not mentioned among them. Presently Masi said he had one or two letters to write which must be ready by to-morrow; and he would profit by that half-hour of leisure to get them off his mind. Silvotti lounged on a bench. Angeloni was installed in the one easy-chair. Old Giorgi sat at the rickety table, around which Colonel Smith-Müller, and Chester, and Masi had been gathered on the occasion of the proposition respecting the rifles for Greece. Giorgi was reading the newspapers of the day, a pile of which, of all political colours, lay at his elbow. And opposite to him sat Masi, who, with a cigar between his teeth, was steadily covering sheet after sheet of note paper.

"Come," said Angeloni, looking at his watch; "shall we dine together? Let us go to the Falcone, and have a dinner *alla Romana!* I haven't done that for a year and more. Come, let us drink to the success of the *Tribune* in a pint of *Vino dei Castelli!*" *

"Yes, directly; when I've done," muttered Masi indistinctly, still holding the cigar between his teeth.

"Your cigar is gone out," observed Silvotti.

"Has it? So it has. I never can keep a weed alight whilst I'm writing. It's prophetic, you see, of what Angeloni calls the *suspension* of the *Tribune!*" said Masi, writing the addresses on some envelopes.

"It only wants a good puff or two, my dear fellow."

"The *Tribune?*"

"No; the cigar."

They all laughed; and Masi, rising from the table,

* Wine grown in the neighbourhood of Rome, at Genzano Marino, Velletri, and other places.

flung the letters he had written into a drawer, and declared himself ready.

"I say, Masi, you are becoming a formidable rival to Telemaco Bini," cried Silvotti, as he led the way downstairs.

"As how?"

"By developing a new gift of letter-writing."

"Ah! You see when an affair has to be wound up, and is approaching the end, there are always one or two epistolary matters to settle," answered Masi. Then he went back a few steps, missing Giorgi, who had lingered behind, and calling to him to come. The old man limped out of the office after the rest, and they all proceeded to dine together at the well-known restaurant which Dr. Angeloni had suggested.

It has been recorded that Giorgi was a *gourmand;* and of all the party he would ordinarily have been the one most keenly to enjoy the dinner and the good wine set before them. But this evening he was absent in his manner and seemed to eat and drink without knowing what he was swallowing. Before they broke up, Dr. Angeloni drank to the success of the *Tribune.* And then Silvotti declared that he also had a toast to propose. As they were there in *petit comité,* all friends and colleagues, he hoped Masi would allow him to drink to a fair and amiable young lady whom they all knew and respected, *la Signorina Violetta!* And to her name he would add that of——

"Don't add any name," interrupted Masi, laying his hand on the other man's arm.

"I thought," said Silvotti, looking at him in surprise, "that it was permissible to make a *brindisi* to the *sposi.*"

"There are no *sposi* in the case. The young lady in question, whom we all honour and admire" (here there was a warm murmur of assent from all), is, "to the best of my belief, perfectly free. I drink her health with all my heart."

He stood up, emptied his glass, and threw it on the

ground, breaking it into a hundred fragments. There was silence for a second or two. Then Masi said gaily, "The goblet shall never be used to celebrate a less worthy toast. And now I must pay the waiter, who probably won't see the romance of the thing, *gratis!*"

Whilst the bill was being paid, Giorgi drew Dr. Angeloni aside, and whispered to him hurriedly, "I wanted to tell you;—I fancy—I cannot help fancying,—that one of those letters which Masi was writing at the office was directed to me."

"To you?"

"Yes. I only caught a glimpse of the cover; but I think it is so. Now why should he write a letter to me sitting there opposite to him? I don't like the look of it."

Neither did Angeloni like the look of it. But there was no time to discuss the matter further.

"Where are you going now, Masi?" asked Angeloni as they left the restaurant. Masi said he was going to the printing-office, which was some distance from the editor's office of the *Tribune*. At a sign from Angeloni, Silvotti offered to walk with Masi to the printing-office, an offer which was accepted without difficulty. And before they separated Angeloni said, "I shall look you up to-morrow, Masi, about that new contributor who wants to write for the *Tribune*. I'm not sure that I'm doing my duty by the *Star of Progress* in letting you have such a capital article instead of securing it for ourselves, but——"

"Oh, my dear Doctor, I quite understand. The new contributor is too moderate for you! The *Tribune* does admit an occasional shade of rose-colour. But for you—oh, uncompromising Cato of the Extreme Left!—there must be no tint but the purest and most unadulterated scarlet."

So they parted with a jest, and an appointment to meet on the morrow.

The next day, Saturday, Silvotti was at the *Tribune*

office early, but Masi had not yet appeared there. The errand boy, lounging on a stool in the outer office, announced that the *Signor Capitano* (for so he was still styled among them) had taken away with him the key of the editor's room last night; he (the boy) did not know why. After about half an hour Masi came in. He was paler than usual, but otherwise unchanged. And when Silvotti observed that he looked fagged, he answered that he was tired.

"I don't think I ever heard you say that you were tired before, in all the time I have known you!" said Silvotti.

"If I had felt tired I should have said so," replied Masi, simply. And it was doubtless true. There was nothing of the Stoic about him.

"Well?" said Silvotti, "and the combination?"

"Failed. I had a letter at my lodging this morning."

"And the paper?"

"To-day's is the last issue. I have given orders at the printing-office."

Silvotti was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Well, *caro Masi*, I am sorry. And yet in one sense it is better that the thing should be settled, and you free from anxiety. It is over now."

"Yes; it is over."

"I expect Angeloni here by and by. You know he said he would come to speak about that contributor."

"Poor contributor!" said Masi, with a laugh. "His hopes of fame from the columns of the *Tribune* are extinguished. Here is the very last number of that journal which will ever illuminate the darkness of the Right, or the ignorance of the Ministry," he added, taking up that morning's paper, still damp from the press.

"Oh, I don't despair of seeing it rise again from its ashes," said Silvotti, smiling.

Masi took a key from his pocket. "I carried this away with me last night," he said, "because there are some papers in my private office that I did not wish

pryed into." Then he put the morning's *Tribune* into Silvotti's hand, and left the room. He turned back for a moment to say, "When Angeloni comes send him into the private office, will you?"

"All right," answered Silvotti, nodding with his eyes fixed on the newspaper he held in his hand.

In a little while old Giorgi's limping step was heard in the ante-room, and he came in. And his first inquiry as he glanced anxiously round the room was "Where's Masi?"

"In his office," replied Silvotti. "I fancy he is destroying some private papers that he would not like to fall into the wrong hands."

Giorgi sat down and wiped the perspiration from his bald head. "How does he seem?" he asked.

"Quite cheerful. I think he is really relieved to know that the worst is over."

They sat without speaking for a few minutes. Then Silvotti said, "Listen! He has shut the door of his room. I heard it clap to."

"I've a good mind to go in," said Giorgi.

"Perhaps it is better not. He told me to send Angeloni to him as soon as he should arrive."

"I wish Angeloni would come!"

"Here he is!" cried Silvotti, as the thin, aristocratic face of the Republican doctor appeared in the doorway.

When Angeloni heard the message left for him by Masi, he said he would go and speak with him at once. He crossed the landing which divided the editor's room from that in which they were; but in half a minute returned saying, "He has fastened the door inside."

The three men looked at each other, and then Silvotti bounded across the landing and threw himself against the door. It had not been locked inside, but a fold of the matting which covered the floor had impeded its opening.

Mario Masi sat in the editorial easy-chair. His head, supported against the back of it, was inclined

to one side; his right hand hung down with a revolver still grasped in it; a stream of blood trickled from his right ear.

"My God!" cried Giorgi, "that noise we heard when we fancied the door had clapped to——!"

Angeloni, with his professional coolness and promptitude, went up to the easy-chair, motioning the others back with his hand. After a few seconds he turned round.

"He is quite dead," he said. "And death must have been instantaneous. He did not suffer."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE letters written by Masi on the previous evening were found in the drawer where he had flung them. There was one to his old uncle, Don Gennaro, the country priest, far away in the Abruzzi. Another was to a political personage, who had been the medium of carrying on various negotiations with the object of supporting the newspaper. A third envelope was addressed to Giorgi. The old man's eyes had not deceived him. Masi had coolly written to him his last instructions, sitting there face to face. The envelope contained also another and far bulkier letter to Nina Guarini, which must have been written previously. The letter to Giorgi was as follows:

"DEAR GIORGI,—

"I entrust to you the task of telling the news of my death to the Signora Nina. Do not, if you can help it, let her hear it in any other way. When you have prepared her, give her the enclosed letter. All my papers in the office are open. I have no business secrets. Forgive me for imposing this trouble on you, and impute it to my confidence in

your sense and courage and fidelity. Thanks for all. My greetings to Angeloni, Silvotti, Bini, and all friends. Farewell.

"MARIO MASI."

The letter to Nina Guarini ran thus:

"DEAREST AND BEST FRIEND,—

"It is better so. You, who know me thoroughly, will think so before long. If there had been any immediate chance of a war, I might have waited and volunteered into the ranks, for the hope of giving—or taking—a few hard knocks before the end. But that does not seem to be coming just yet. Everything looks very tiresome. It is better to finish it. I told you long ago that when I gave up the *Tribune* I should give up a great many other things at the same time. At all events I fall at my post. When a man pays his life, his creditors can expect no more. You know, dear Nina, that it would not have suited me to endure a long struggle with troubles. I should most certainly have ended it sooner or later, and it is better to leave Violet free than a widow. You were right about all that. You are always right. It was a foolish fancy, and would never have answered for life. She will be far happier without me. Not just at first, but some day. I wrote her a letter last night, saying that I was about to start on a long journey, and that I released her from her engagement. It may serve to prepare her for the truth.

"Now I want you, my dear friend, to relieve Violet's mind from any remorse of conscience. There is not the slightest real ground for her to feel any; but you know what she is, my poor little Puritan! Tell her that everything was done for me that could be done. And, if you think well, show her the enclosed. I answered it by post. It is a handsome offer; and she will see that I did not come to the end for want of help. But you know I would never have accepted money which there was no chance of re-

paying. If the combination with M. could have been effected, good! If not, not.

"And, after all, how much better to drop the curtain and put out the lights when the best of the play is over! The best is over for me. It has been a very good play, and I have enjoyed it. Don't be sorry, dear Nina. Good night.

"Your most affectionate

"MARIO."

The note alluded to, which was enclosed in the letter, was from William Chester. It contained an offer, couched in a few simple phrases, to assist Captain Masi with a loan, if he thought such assistance would be of solid and permanent use to him. Chester wrote: "As a relative of the lady whom you are engaged to marry, and in whose happiness I am much interested, I have thought myself justified in making this proposition, which, from a stranger, might appear to be merely an unsolicited intrusion into your affairs."

The manner of this note was formal and business-like; but its purport moved Nina Guarini more than the finest phrases could have done. She knew, as Masi had not known or guessed, what a noble self-forgetfulness, what a generous sacrifice of feeling, were represented by those simple words. She was sensible of this even in the first shock of reading Masi's letter, after Giorgi had brought her the news of what had happened. In truth, there had been little room for preparation. The first glimpse of the old man's face announced calamity. And it was not many minutes before she had guessed the worst. "Tell me it all," she said. "Spare nothing." And Giorgi narrated in detail all the events of last evening and of that morning: the writing of the letters, the dinner at the Falcone, the toast, the final terrible scene in the office. Angeloni had been there, and his presence was a guarantee that nothing had been neglected.

But it was all over. There had been no struggle, no suffering. Masi had proceeded with the coolest deliberation, and had even taken measures that the noise of the shot should be deadened, by his way of putting the revolver to his ear; so that, in fact, nothing had been heard but a dull, faint shock, which they had taken for the shutting of a door. Giorgi told it all clearly and unflinchingly. And now, he said, they must think of the living. Nina felt that she had never done justice to the old man's strength of character. The truth was, he rose to the occasion, with a curious pride in Masi's having relied on him. His usual querulous sharpness had disappeared. He was gentle, helpful, and prompt.

"To you," said Nina, "I confide the care of keeping this from our poor girl. She must not know it roughly or suddenly. She must not know it at all for some time to come. Thank God, Mario wrote that letter to her, saying that he was going away. It gives us time. Go to the aunt. Keep watch and ward. Don't leave the house. Don't let a newspaper find its way to Violet. I will come to her when I can command myself, and be sure that my face will not betray me. Meanwhile there is one person among them all who can be trusted: Kitty, the servant maid. Tell *her* everything. You may rely on her sense and devotion. Take my carriage. It is waiting at the door for Beppe. I will explain to him."

The necessity for action nerved Nina to throw off that prostration which follows a great shock. "I can cry afterwards," she said to herself. "It is always time enough for that." One of her first thoughts was to send for Chester. On him she chiefly relied to sustain Violet. He had proved what a warm and noble heart beat under that quiet undemonstrative exterior. Also she would take his advice about telling Mr. Higgins this news. He lodged, as will be remembered, in the same house with the Higginses; and Nina begged her husband to go himself, and bring Chester back with him.

It was still early in the forenoon, and Beppe found the young Englishman within. He was in his bedroom, with an open portmanteau on the floor, and piles of clothes scattered on the bed and on chairs, ready to be packed up. Beppe, in a few hurried words, told him that the Signora Nina begged him to go to her at once. Something dreadful had happened to poor Masi. He would hear all about it from the Signora. There was a cab waiting at the door. He was implored not to delay. Chester had seized his hat, and was half way downstairs before the words were well spoken.

"Something happened to Masi?" he said, looking at the other man's agitated face when they were in the cab. "But what—? How—? I have a letter from him in my pocket which came by the early post this morning! He was quite well then."

But Beppe retired behind his pocket-handkerchief, weeping in the most unaffected manner, and left all further explanation to his wife. He had the ready Italian sympathy with disaster, and the ready Italian willingness to show it. And neither were at all checked by the manner of Masi's sudden end. No thought of blame,—no sense even of awe at this violent deed,—crossed the mind of any of Masi's friends for an instant. It was most terrible and tragic to think of his having been driven to destroy himself; but the horror did not reach beyond.

The sight of Nina's white, tearless face startled Chester more than her husband's expressions of grief had done; and the news she had to tell shocked him unspeakably. And he was not only shocked; he was bewildered. He did not comprehend it. Things could not, surely, have been so desperate as to drive Masi to this frightful resolution. Assistance he knew had been proffered——. "Yes," interrupted Nina; "most generously proffered. I have seen your noble letter." How, then, could it have been? What could have been the terrible prospect before Masi which rendered such a hideous alternative preferable?

How much more hideous that alternative appeared to Chester's mind than it had seemed to Masi's, Nina did not fully know. But she in a great measure divined it. "And then," continued Chester, "to leave Violet! To abandon the poor, loving girl in this slough of misery, instead of staying to shield and spare her! Was not that aim enough to make a man cling to life?"

"Well, well," said Nina, in a dry choking voice, "he is past our help, or our sympathy, or our blame, poor fellow! Let us, as Giorgi wisely and bravely said, now think of the living."

Then she told Chester of the means she had taken to keep the news from Violet for the present. She was sure that Giorgi would not abandon his post. He would watch over the girl faithfully, and so would Kitty Low. But Violet would need better comfort than either of these could give her. "The poor child will be in grief enough as it is," said Nina, "at the thought of his going away. It was a blessed inspiration of Mario's to write to her in that sense. Violet's good angel must have put it into his head. It accounts for her not seeing him. It accounts for so much!"

"The first thing we ought to do," said Chester after a brief pause of anxious consideration, "is to get her out of Rome."

"You are right! You are thoroughly right!" answered Nina, eagerly. "But how is it to be managed?"

Chester said that Mr. Higgins must be told the whole truth without delay. As for his wife, they must leave it to him to decide; but Chester was strongly of opinion that the only sure means of preventing her from blurting out a sudden word to Violet was to keep her in ignorance. "What she does not know she can't reveal," said Chester. "But in such a case as this I own I have small confidence either in Mrs. Higgins's head or heart." He undertook to tell Mr. Higgins, and no time must be lost. Every day, every hour, that

Violet remained in Rome now was dangerous. She would probably offer no opposition to being taken away, now that she believed Mario was no longer there. Nina promised him to remain at home until the evening. Violet would probably hasten to her friend with the news contained in Mario's letter. If she did not, Nina would go to her after dusk. And then William Chester hurried away to perform the task he had undertaken.

A few paces from the door of the boarding-house, he came upon Colonel Smith-Müller, who was just leaving it. The fellow had a strange air on him, compounded of triumph and apprehension. There was a smile of victorious cunning on his face, and he swaggered, and shouldered the passers-by with bullying insolence. But his restless eyes glanced furtively from side to side of the street, and occasionally he turned his head to glance over his shoulder. He walked more quickly than was his habit, too; and he kept one hand thrust into the breast of his coat, which was buttoned up to the chin. He became aware of Chester while the latter was still at some distance from him, and seemed anxious to avoid him. But being compelled to pass close to him, he lifted his hat with a mocking flourish and a boastful laugh, which sickened Chester. The Englishman was assailed by a sudden fear lest Smith-Müller should have anticipated his errand to Mr. Higgins. But as he mounted the stairs he said to himself, "No, it is impossible that even that ruffian could be publicly swaggering and grinning at this moment if he knew what had happened. He cannot have heard it yet." But the incident brought home to him more forcibly than ever that no time must be lost in revealing it to Mr. Higgins. Chester sent a message begging Mr. Higgins to come to him in his room. And before many minutes had elapsed Uncle Joshua appeared there.

Before Chester could speak, the old man began, "Well, I have succeeded! I have succeeded! I told

you I had a plan. A man that has seen as much of the world as I have was not likely not to get his own way in such a matter. It has been a pretty expensive job first and last. But I don't mind a score of pounds more or less, when I know the object is a wise one, and a just one, and calculated for the good of my family."

Whilst Chester was considering in what form of words to communicate that which he had to tell, and paying not much heed to the other's speech, Mr. Higgins suddenly spread out before him on the bed a paper bearing the signature of Mario Masi.

Chester started back at the unexpected sight of that name. "What is this?" he cried.

"You can see what it is," returned Mr. Higgins. "It is an undertaking to release my niece Violet from her engagement, in consideration of a sum of money paid over by me to Captain Marsy for that purpose. It ain't many uncles, let alone great-uncles, that would do as much. But that is my character. And besides, the child is a good child, and if she has been wrong it has been from inexperience and the natural weakness of the female mind when left to itself. She is free now, and some day she will thank me for it."

"She is free, indeed," answered Chester, in a low voice. "But her freedom has come in a very strange and terrible manner—by death—by a sudden and violent death." Then laying his hand on the old man's arm, he said gently, "You have strength of character to bear a great shock. Masi is no more. He shot himself this morning."

"Merciful Lord!" exclaimed Uncle Joshua, falling back into a chair. But after a second or two he started up again, crying, "But it is impossible,—impossible! There is some error. He sent me this paper not half-an-hour ago. The ink was scarcely dry. Why you must have met the man who brought it. He hadn't left me five minutes before you sent for me."

"Was it *he* who brought it?" Chester seized the paper and examined it carefully. It was a clumsy

forgery. Masi's writing had been imitated very roughly, either from carelessness or want of skill; and the style of the phraseology was unlike his. But this Mr. Higgins had not been able to detect. The bad English seemed to him quite natural. Struck by a sudden idea, Chester demanded if Smith-Müller had received any money.

"To be sure! He was empowered by Marsy to manage the affair. I paid him just now. Here's his receipt as well as Marsy's."

At another moment Chester's burning indignation at this piece of audacious villainy would have conquered every other consideration, and he would have bent all his energies to have it exposed and punished. But now he must think first of Violet.

With all the circumstantial details that had reached him he narrated the events of that morning to Mr. Higgins; and succeeded in convincing him of their truth, and in bringing him to see that it was all-important to get Violet out of Rome without delay. The old man, although greatly shocked and agitated, did not lose his presence of mind. He at once declared that they must all set off by the first train which left Rome for Turin, and thence they would make what speed they could to France and England. He entrusted Chester with full powers to make all the necessary arrangements. It was agreed that Mrs. Higgins should not be told for the present of Masi's death; but merely that he had left Rome and given up his engagement to Violet. When Chester asked whether it would be possible to induce Mrs. Higgins to start by the mail train which left Rome that night for the North, Uncle Joshua answered with all his accustomed authoritative promptitude. Mrs. Higgins understood perfectly well, he said, that his orders must be carried out; and, inasmuch as he never issued any commands which were not perfectly judicious and calculated for the welfare of his family, it was only reasonable for him to exact unhesitating obedience.

It was not, however, found so easy to carry out this clear and simple theory with Mrs. Joshua Higgins. When she was told that she must leave Rome that night on her way back to England, she did not, indeed, openly rebel, but she opposed a passive resistance to all efforts to induce her to hasten; and she sat tearfully inert on the sofa in their sitting-room without stirring a finger to assist in the preparations.

"My packing!" she moaned, looking up plaintively at William Chester. "I am willing to sacrifice myself for Mr. Higgins's family,—the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I am bodily unequal to the task of cramming my lilac satin—at sixteen and sixpence a yard, Mr. Chester—into the trunk like hay. And how can the packing be done properly between now and ten o'clock to-night? And why should we fly from Rome like malefactors if that extremely dishonourable and immoral Captain Masi *has* jilted Violet?"

"Woman!" cried her husband sternly, "do not mention the unfortunate man's name in that tone." And then fearing to betray more than he wished her to know, he walked out of the room, leaving Chester to listen to her lamentations. At length in despair Chester bethought himself of suggesting that Kitty Low should be sent for to assist Mrs. Higgins, and set off himself to fetch her at once.

His heart beat violently as he approached Miss Baines's dwelling. Kitty herself opened the door to him, and a glance at her face showed him that she knew all. Violet was gone to the Signora Guarini under the escort of the faithful Giorgi. He had not left her for a moment, and Kitty declared that his tact, patience, and devotion were more than she could describe or could have believed.

"And Violet? how does she bear it? What does she think? She does not suspect——?"

No. Kitty was sure that she did not suspect the worst. But she was sadly prostrated;—almost like one stunned. "And," said the woman, "it is pitiful to see the struggle

in her mind not to be angry or resentful against him. But she feels it is hard and unjust to be left like that; so sudden, without a word of warning, no sacrifice made to face troubles for her sake. Of course if she knew that he was gone from this world for evermore, there wouldn't be anything in her heart but grief and pity. And yet, Mr. Chester, truth is truth, and justice is justice for the dead as well as the living. We are taught to forgive trespasses as we hope to be forgiven. But we're not taught to say there *are* no trespasses, nor yet to mash up right and wrong together so as no one can tell one from t'other. I always think it's cruel unfair to the folks as do resist temptation and stick to their post like good soldiers of the Lord until He gives 'em leave to rest,—I do think it unfair not to hold them higher than self-seekers that just desert when things go against their will, and leave the rest of the world to fight it out."

That same night three men were watching in the office of the *Tribune of the People*. In the inner room tall tapers burned on either side of a table covered with black cloth, on which was stretched a motionless figure with a calm pale face. Wreaths of flowers were scattered over the black draperies; and the bier with its serene solemn burthen, and the fragrant flowers, and the clear motionless flame of the tapers, made a strange dissonance on that vulgar background of smart flimsy upholstery, and the squalid litter of dust and torn paper, and cigar ashes and splashes of ink, which strewed the floor. Silence and stillness were in the room. No breeze made the clear flame of the tapers quiver; no breath raised the quiet breast upon the bier. In the outer room Silvotti, Giorgi, and Dr. Angeloni kept mournful watch. All at once the door opened and a woman came in. They rose in surprise, but she raised her hand signing to them to be silent, and beckoning Giorgi, motioned him to lead her across the landing, and to open the door of the chamber of death

beyond. It was Nina Guarini. She advanced steadily to the bier and laid a handful of fresh white flowers on it. Then she took from her purse a lock of bright brown hair which she had cut from Violet's head an hour ago, and fastened it on the unconscious breast with a light firm hand. She bent and touched the marble forehead with her lips; and then knelt down and whispered a prayer she used to murmur at her mother's knee with little Marie's baby-hand clasped in hers, and little Marie's baby-voice lisping the words after her.

At the same moment the rushing train was speeding northward like a phantom through the glimmering darkness of the sad Campagna; cutting lives asunder like a sword of Destiny; bearing a freight of human creatures with hopes, and fears, and joys, and sorrows, and keen anticipations, and dull apathies, towards the unknown bourne from whence the silent traveller, so still near Nina's supplicating hands, would return nevermore.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Prince Massimo Nasoni had found it by no means easy to recover from the shock of the scene he had gone through with Laszinski. He considered himself to be an injured victim, with deep cause for murmuring against Fate. He found himself mixed up with a painful story of bigamy, his house besieged by a dangerous ruffian, and himself made the unwilling recipient of that ruffian's secret.

The annoyance to which he had been exposed, his terror lest a scandal should explode with which his name must be unavoidably connected, and the sense of being surrounded on all sides by disagreeable possibilities had an odd effect on his sentiments towards Nina;

and embittered them by a subtle change like a chemical transformation. Why had she gone through that ecclesiastical ceremony of marriage with Guarini, whilst (as she herself had confessed) the suspicion lurked in her mind that Laszinski might still be among the living? It is a fact that Laszinski's warning to mistrust a woman who had no religion had not been utterly without effect on Massimo's mind. The unsatisfactory results of a minute attention to sundry external formalities on his own life and conduct by no means reconciled him to Nina's neglecting them. It was difficult, of course, to practise the cardinal virtues; but one might at least attend the ceremonies of the Church.

The Prince was in a chronic state of uneasiness and apprehension as to what might be Laszinski's next move. Could he have disposed of a large sum of money, he would willingly have given it to get Laszinski shipped off to the Antipodes. But he was almost destitute of ready money. If Laszinski, in default of a heavy bribe, should choose to gratify his rancour by filling Rome with a disgraceful scandal in which the noble name of Nasoni would play a prominent part, the result might possibly be to break off Don Ciccio's marriage, now definitely arranged. And although that might not have deeply wounded the Prince's paternal susceptibilities, yet he well knew that his son and his mother would make him suffer for it. He was in a continuous fever of anxiety His rest was broken, and he rose unrefreshed every morning, to cast a gloomily scrutinizing glance at his mirror, and to register with unspeakable bitterness of spirit the deepening lines on his brow and round his eyes. His only gleam of comfort came from the thought that Laszinski might possibly have come to some arrangement with Guarini to leave him and Nina unmolested for money This Guarini—against whom the Prince nourished a singular grudging dislike although he had never spoken with him in his life—was said to be rich!

Massimo lived for some days shut up almost like a prisoner; dreading to go abroad into the streets, dreading to receive a visitor, dreading to look at a newspaper. He declared himself indisposed; and denied his door to his friends. And in fact he did feel feverish and unwell. He had attended some religious exercises held by a pious confraternity in the Nasoni chapel; and had a book of devotions placed within reach of his hand beside his couch. He did not read it; finding a novel of Monsieur Alexandre Dumas, Père, more calculated to raise his spirits in the depressed state of his nervous system. The Prince extremely objected to the modern realistic school of French fiction; declaring that he could not conceive how persons of condition and refinement were able to endure the company of that revolting *canaille* which Monsieur Zola portrays with such wonderful, such terrific, force and reality. But he found that the favourites of his youth, Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, had power to amuse him still. And there was the book of devotions ready at hand in case he should find himself equal to any spiritual exercises.

It had been on the Tuesday that Laszinski's visit to Palazzo Nasoni had occurred, and on the following Friday the old Princess came across the courtyard to see her son. She came to inquire after his health, and made him endure a long homily on the vanity of earthly pleasures. He listened with unusual meekness. Nay, more, he listened to her when she broached a proposition (made now for the third time) by an illustrious kinsman, to pay all his debts,—on one condition. The illustrious kinsman was very illustrious. He had Imperial Austrian blood in his veins: for the Nasonis counted among their not very distant relatives one of the dispossessed Princes of Italy. It had been discussed more than once in august circles whether there could not be found a way to arrange "Max's" affairs: the said affairs causing periodical scandals and an unpleasant paragraph which made the round of certain

European newspapers with a regularity worthy of a more celestial orbit. The difficulty of "arranging Max's affairs" (in plebeian language, compounding with his creditors) consisted in the condition which the illustrious kinsman insisted on annexing to his "arrangement." Prince Massimo was to receive an annual allowance, and to resign into the hands of his son the entire management of what family property still remained. The Prince had hitherto combated this project, by which, as he said with naïve egotism, his creditors and his son would chiefly benefit; whilst he remained trammelled within the limits of a narrow income, and deprived of the chance of making any fresh debts.

But on the occasion of his mother's visit he absolutely appeared inclined to consider the proposition. This phenomenon, although agreeable to the old Princess Teresa from one point of view, yet, coupled with the sight of the book of devotion, aroused her maternal anxiety. She thought that the two together intimated that Massimo must be seriously unwell. And she resolved, besides offering up special prayers to Santa Filomena, to send for her own physician. For it was proper to neglect no precautions; and, perhaps, it was too much to expect that Santa Filomena should undertake the case quite unassisted.

However, as the days passed, and Laszinski made no sign, the Prince began to recover his spirits. By the time that Monday morning arrived he even ventured to open a newspaper, and to cast his eyes over its columns as he sipped his chocolate. The journal which lay on the Prince's breakfast-table every morning was an extremely well written and ably edited print. It enjoyed the reputation of being the organ of an influential party in the Vatican. But it by no means confined its labours to propagating items of other-worldly intelligence for the edification of the devout. It was usually very well informed as to what was going on in mundane circles; and it even occasionally printed the sensational

details of various crimes and misdemeanours; no doubt with the laudable aim of pointing the contrast between the present wicked times and those good old days when such things never happened; or when, at all events, there was no pestilent free Press to say anything about them.

The Prince first read the leading article, which was a strong attack against the project of legalizing divorce which at that time was being talked of in Parlimentary circles. He shifted the double eyeglass which had become necessary to him in reading (much to his chagrin), and nodded his head with an expression of the warmest assent. "Marriage is no mere civil contract, but a holy tie which the Church must sanctify by her benediction, thus consecrating the only safe basis of society." "Most true! Extremely true!" said the Prince to himself. "Divorce is absolutely a social dissolvent. Pray Heaven that we Romans, at least, may not be forced to leave so fatal a heritage to our children!"

He felt a certain glow of complacency at finding his own sentiments so thoroughly in accord with the views of the Clerical journalist. And he folded over the journal, and proceeded in his reading with a sense of moral elevation which was extremely comforting.

"*Mysterious murder.*" That was the heading of a paragraph which next attracted Prince Massimo's attention. And he read as follows:

"The whole neighbourhood of the Vicolo della Lupa (an obscure alley in Trastevere) was thrown into great excitement on Sunday morning by the discovery of a murder which presents several singular and mysterious features. A foreigner, who has been lodging in the topmost story of a poor house there, was found stabbed to the heart in the chamber he occupied. The medical experts declare he must have been dead at least twelve hours when the body was discovered about ten o'clock on Sunday morning. The landlady, a poor widow, had reason to suspect that her lodger, who owed her long arrears of rent, had some intention of running away without paying her. Receiving no answer to repeated

knockings and callings on the Sunday morning, and finding the door locked, she caused it to be broken open, fearing that her lodger had secretly gone off in the night. He must, in fact, have intended to do so, for a small valise was found ready packed by his side, and he seems to have been on the point of leaving the house when the assassin or assassins surprised him. The police are of opinion that the deed could not have been accomplished single-handed. No sound of a struggle was heard. Nor can any of the inmates remember to have seen strangers on the staircase. But this latter circumstance is of small importance, as it would have been perfectly possible for a man to climb up the dark staircase without meeting any one, or without being seen sufficiently well to be recognized. The murder must have been due to motives of vengeance and not of robbery, for a considerable sum of money in Italian bank-notes, as well as a silver watch, were found on the body. The weapon, a triangular-bladed dagger of peculiar manufacture, was left in the wound. And we are informed that attached to the haft was found a paper with some words on it in the Russian language. But for obvious reasons it is not desirable to say more on this point at present. The murderer or murderers must have locked the door after perpetrating the crime, and carried away the key with them. The countenance of the deceased bears an expression of terror and anxiety. The eyes are wide open and staring, and one hand convulsively clutches a loaded cane. The body is that of a tall powerfully-built man, apparently between fifty and sixty years of age. No papers whatever were found on the body or in the room. It is suspected that some may have been removed by the assassins. In a leathern pocket-book containing the bank-notes, were found also two printed visiting cards, bearing the inscription, 'ALEXIS SMITH-MÜLLER, *Colonel en retraite, Bala Palanka, Serbie.*' We understand that no such person is known at the Servian Legation. The police are prosecuting active inquiries.

But up to the time of going to press no clue had been obtained to the perpetrators of this extraordinary crime."

It may be stated at once that, whether a clue was ever found or not, the perpetrators of the crime were never arrested. One or two persons in Rome at the time were well convinced on excellent grounds that the death of Laszinski had been decreed by a society of Russian Nihilists to whom he had played traitor, and carried out by emissaries despatched from Geneva for that purpose. But those one or two persons took care to keep their conviction to themselves.

Prince Massimo Nasoni was overwhelmed by such a flood of conflicting emotions on reading the above account that he fell ill in earnest, and lay for some weeks in a nervous fever. He was haunted by a horrible suspicion that Nina had been privy to this crime. As to Guarini's guilty knowledge of the matter he had scarcely any doubt. A revolutionist like that would stick at nothing. And who had so large an interest as Guarini in Laszinski's death? Massimo absolutely felt himself hampered in settling his own spiritual scores with his confessor, by the idea that he might be in some sort an accessary after the fact by keeping his suspicions to himself. At length, one day, when his strength was much prostrated by fever, and his spirit much depressed by a long interview with his mother's Director, a stern, severe ecclesiastic of the ascetic type, the poor Prince began to fear that he was in danger of dying forthwith. And he sent a hastily scrawled line in that sense to Nina Guarini, begging her to come and see him. She obeyed the summons, and the two were face to face once more.

The Prince in a tremulous voice, and with considerable hesitation—for it was more difficult than he had foreseen to speak with Nina's grave pale face before him, and Nina's earnest honest eyes looking into his,—exhorted her to seek pardon and reconciliation with Mother Church; and above all if there were any secret which burthened her mind, to make amends and do

penance. Nina at first thought his mind was wandering in fever. But his meaning presently began to dawn upon her.

"I can't get absolution myself, with this thing on my mind," said Massimo, looking at her fretfully with haggard eyes, and then turning his head away on the pillow. Nina stood at the bedside regarding him with grave contemptuous pity. "I think," she said at length, "that you suspect me of complicity with a murder."

He started up wildly and laid his hand on her mouth. "No, no; not complicity!" he cried. "For mercy's sake don't say such words!"

"I might more justly implore you for mercy's sake not to think such thoughts. But you cannot help them. I see you now as you are; and I am sorry, not angry." Then she bent down and spoke more softly in his ear. "Listen! Of the details of that deed I *know* no more than all the world knows. But many circumstances make me believe that the man Casimir Laszinski" (she uttered the name with a cutting clearness which made Massimo wince nervously as though a sharp lancet had been flashed too near his face), "was killed by some former comrades in conspiracy whom he had betrayed, as he betrayed every human being who trusted him, from his youth upward. I am not a murderess, Max,—not even in intention."

She was turning to go away, when he said faintly, but with an obvious expression of relief on his face, "We may never see each other again, Nina. I am very ill."

She looked at him quietly. "Oh no," she answered. "You have been frightened. You have not much moral courage or fortitude. I say my last farewell to you, here and now; but you may look forward to confessing a great many more sins to your priest before you die."

Massimo tried—really tried—to be mournfully affected by the thought that he had had his last interview with Nina Guarini. But no sooner was the door

shut behind her than he took up a little ivory hand mirror from the table at his side, and looked at his own image more hopefully than he had done for some days past. "I am pulled down, undoubtedly," he said to himself. "But Nina evidently did not think me in danger. She would not have deceived me. She was always sincere." And from that hour he began to mend with great rapidity.

And so these two drifted asunder. And the currents of the air and the water carried them apart once more on the Ocean of Life.

Three years later William Chester came home from India. He had gone back there almost immediately after accompanying Violet and her aunt to England, not caring to take the full holiday he had promised himself. Work was best for him, he said. "That's Mr. Chester's way of curing the troubles of the mind," observed Kitty Low confidentially to Miss Baines. "Ah, it's a grand sight, a man as stands up and faces his trouble, and fights it out, and holds his tongue!"

William Chester had certainly faced his trouble and held his tongue. Before he parted from Violet she had learned all the dreadful truth about Mario's death. And the dumb despair into which it plunged her had alarmed them all. She scarcely shed a tear; but would sit for hours in apparent lethargy, neither speaking nor moving, but with an expression of settled misery on her face that was heart-breaking. The faithful Kitty it was who first devised the means of breaking this dead calm which seemed to threaten her reason. "She wants a word from some one as was fond of him," said Kitty. "We may speak as fair and soft as we like, but she knows that in our hearts we can't help but blame that unfortunate fellow-creature, and our words are no comfort to her. You just get the Signora to write to her telling all particulars. Don't be afraid of that doing her harm. Anything is better than letting her brood over her own fancies. The Signora liked the poor misguided Captain, and was kind to him. And besides

she hasn't got her mind so full of the right and wrong of it as we have. She looks at human beings more as we look at weather—something that must be taken as it is, and can't be mended."

Kitty's prescription was found to answer admirably. Nina Guarini was most thankful to receive the permission to write freely and fully to Violet, and she sent the girl a long letter. This opened the floodgates of her tears, and she wept passionately—wept herself to sleep in fact, with the letter clasped in her hand, and fell into an unbroken slumber that lasted many hours.

"After that she'll do," said Kitty. "It's only a question of time now. Young hearts are like young bones: a breakage ain't so fatal. They're elastic, and soon knit up again. Nature don't let folks die of a broken heart at twenty years old."

Nature did not let Violet die. But she suffered keenly and long, for her character was tenacious, and the blow had been very terrible. But she read and re-read the two letters which Nina had enclosed in her own: one of these was Mario's last epistle to Nina, and the other was Chester's letter to him offering assistance. If William Chester had made any attempt to speak again of love, if he had even remained near at hand, Violet might have shrunk from him. But as the weeks and months passed, and her young strong frame recovered its healthy tone, the clear honesty of her conscience asserted itself. This man was true and brave and generous and simple, not a story-book hero; neither a paladin nor a saint; but a man who could put himself aside for the sake of another, who scorned to flinch from his duty, and was gentle because he was strong.

He wrote frequently to Aunt Betsy, telling her the minutest details of his life in exile, as he called it. And he sometimes added a little word to Violet, such as a kind brother might have written—nothing more. But Violet thought of him more often and more tenderly as the months went by.

One good result of her thinking was the resolve to imitate her Cousin William in his unselfish care for others. She had always been affectionate to her Aunt Betsy, but with a certain wilfulness. Henceforward she tended her with the devotion of a daughter; and uncomplainingly accompanied her to such winter resorts as she could be induced to visit for her health's sake. Torquay or St. Leonard's formed the utmost limits of Miss Baines's travels, for she could never be induced to cross the British Channel again as long as she lived. And Uncle Joshua, approving this resolution, could not refrain from pointing the moral to his niece Betsy, observing that she could now see what good had ever come of her mania for foreign parts; and bidding her in future rely wholly on his judgment, which had been proved to be (for all purposes of guiding the conduct of his female relatives) practically infallible.

But to Violet he never made any such speeches. Her uncle's goodness to her, indeed, touched her deeply. Taught in this one case by that great master of courtesy, the heart, Mr. Higgins was almost delicate in his consideration for Violet. Jane Higgins found herself reduced very unmistakably to the second place in her husband's regard (if, indeed, she had ever occupied any other), and gave up struggling against her rival, on receiving a distinct intimation from her lord and master that his testamentary dispositions on her — Jane Higgins's—behalf, would entirely depend on her behaviour towards his great-niece. And so the years went by, and now William Chester was coming home Whether he were coming home to stay, or whether he would go back to India, seemed uncertain. "It depends," replied Miss Baines oracularly to an inquiry on the subject from Mrs. Joshua Higgins. And being pressed further, gave a nervous glance at Violet, and added "on circumstances."

One June day, Violet, sitting under a branching elm in Dozebury churchyard, saw a well-known figure approaching her along the dappled shadows of the avenue:

a figure with a sunburnt face and honest grey eyes, and one or two lines across the forehead that had not been there when they parted. She stood up white and trembling; and when he came close to her—very calmly as to his outward aspect, but with a wildly beating heart—she held out both her hands and looked at him with such a smile, although the tears were pouring down her cheeks, that he cried, with a sudden radiance on his face, "Oh Violet,—my love!"

"If you will have me, dear," she answered. And he clasped her to his heart.

And thus they met again on the wide sea of life, and thenceforth held their course together to the last haven.

Years afterwards, Violet, musing with her hand on the head of her little fair-haired son, would thank God reverently, who had given her such sweet calm after tempest. The sorrowful story of her first love came to be like a child's memory of some tale of wonder, whereof no faintest misty outline, no dark or rosy tint, can ever change. For it was removed from the ceaseless corrosion of things actual;—that tireless tide of To-day, that laps away granite, and piles up sand, and changes all the world. That strange, sad story was safe in the immutable Past. And Violet, pressing her boy to her breast and listening for her husband's homeward step, would think of the girl who had loved and lost so piteously, as a different being from the happy wife and mother who sate there; and would remember with a soft compassion how they two had met and parted like Ships upon the Sea.

THE END.

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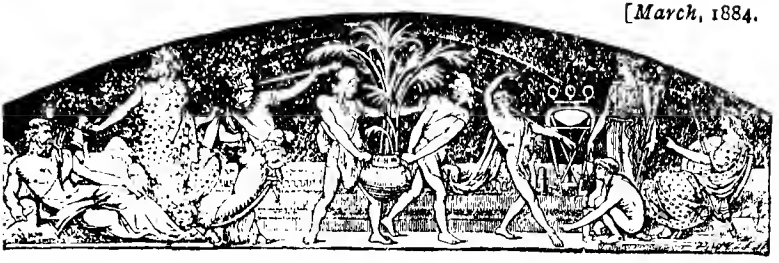

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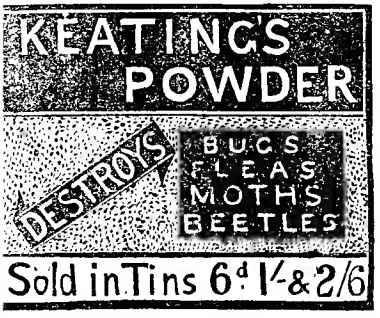

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